

interzone

MARCH 2001

NUMBER 165

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A CELEBRATION OF *John Christopher*



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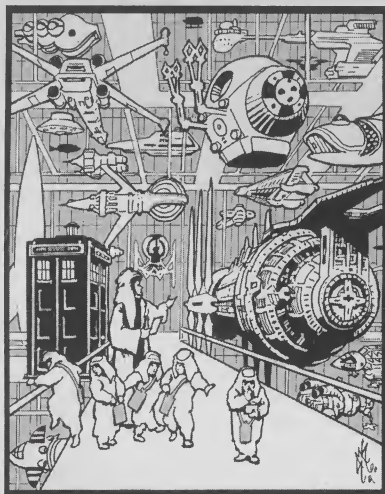
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

MARCH 2001

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Cover photomontage by Paul Brazier – "Brighton, for sure!"

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Measurement systems spring firstly from our bodily experience, I believe: the first joint of my thumb is an inch long; my feet are a foot long; it is a yard from the tip of my nose to the fist at the end of my outstretched arm (it is also the length of my stride); and a man is a fathom tall. Only slightly more abstract is the tale of how the standard gauge of railway lines was arrived at: railway carriages were built by the same people who made road carriages, so they used the same axles to save money; these axles set wheels a particular distance apart so they could fit in the deep ruts in the old Roman brick roads; and those ruts were made by Roman carts and chariots. The standard distance apart of Roman wheels was governed by the need to have two horses to pull them – so the modern standard railway gauge is linked directly to the width of two ancient Roman horses.

Likewise with time, a day is one period of light followed by dark (one planetary rotation); a month is the time the moon takes to cycle through its phases; and a year is the length of time our seasons take to cycle (the period of our orbit around the sun).

Of course, these personal measurement systems don't have enough graduations to make them truly useful, so we have subdivided or agglomerated them into other invented units. Inches became sub-divided into fractions, and then thousandths, as the need for more accuracy grew. At the other end of the scale, again the Romans gave us the mile (a thousand double paces according to my dictionary), and that served mankind well enough until we began to consider space travel, when the huge number of miles involved became meaningless. For this, we developed the concept of the astronomical unit (the mean distance from the Earth to the sun) and then, on up the scale, the parsec (still related to an astronomical unit, although the focal point is removed) to the much less subjective light year.

With time, the problem is similar. We divided the day first into four portions related to the sun and the workday: morning (forenoon); afternoon; evening (the time we stay awake into the night after working); and night, when we can't see for the lack of sun, so we sleep. Hours were introduced arbitrarily, twelve to night and twelve to day to begin with, which gave all kinds of problems of indication as the day length varied. The invention of clockwork regularized this, and then came the subdivision to minutes and then seconds (as the geometrical subdivisions of angles also have these names, I suspect a further rotational link, but I don't know of one). And, coming back to the subjective, a sec-

COUNTING THE YEARS, COUNTING THE HOURS

ond is about how long a fit human heart at rest takes to beat once.

Above the year, I believe the next astronomical rotational measurement is the great year (about 25,800 years), which I thought was the period of our sun's orbit around the galactic centre, but appears to be "the length of time the equinoctial points take to make a complete revolution" (Chambers). We've tried subjective agglomeration, but "a lifetime" – man's allotted span of three score years and ten – is too arbitrary (and not terrifically useful mathematically) and the vague "generation" (about twenty-five years) is too unspecific to be useful for measurement.

So, instead, we simply name the count of years: ten years is a decade; a hundred years is a century; and a thousand years is a millennium. And a millenium is a very long time subjectively – about 400 generations or fifteen lifetimes. Long enough for the peoples of the island of Britain to expand from a forgotten outpost of the Roman empire to a world-spanning empire, then shrink back into their own island.

In the face of this vast span of years, it seems invidious to carp about when we should celebrate the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, especially as it seems to be unclear exactly when those millennia began, and when that datum was decided. So we brought it back to the personal, the subjective, and we

decided to celebrate the simple change of the number in the fourth register from one to two. Apart from the amazing scam of the millennium bug where software experts fleeced huge corporations of billions as a precaution against a chimera, the coming of the new millennium has made little difference – I had to have a new cheque book, because my old one still had 19___ printed on it for the date, but that was about it.

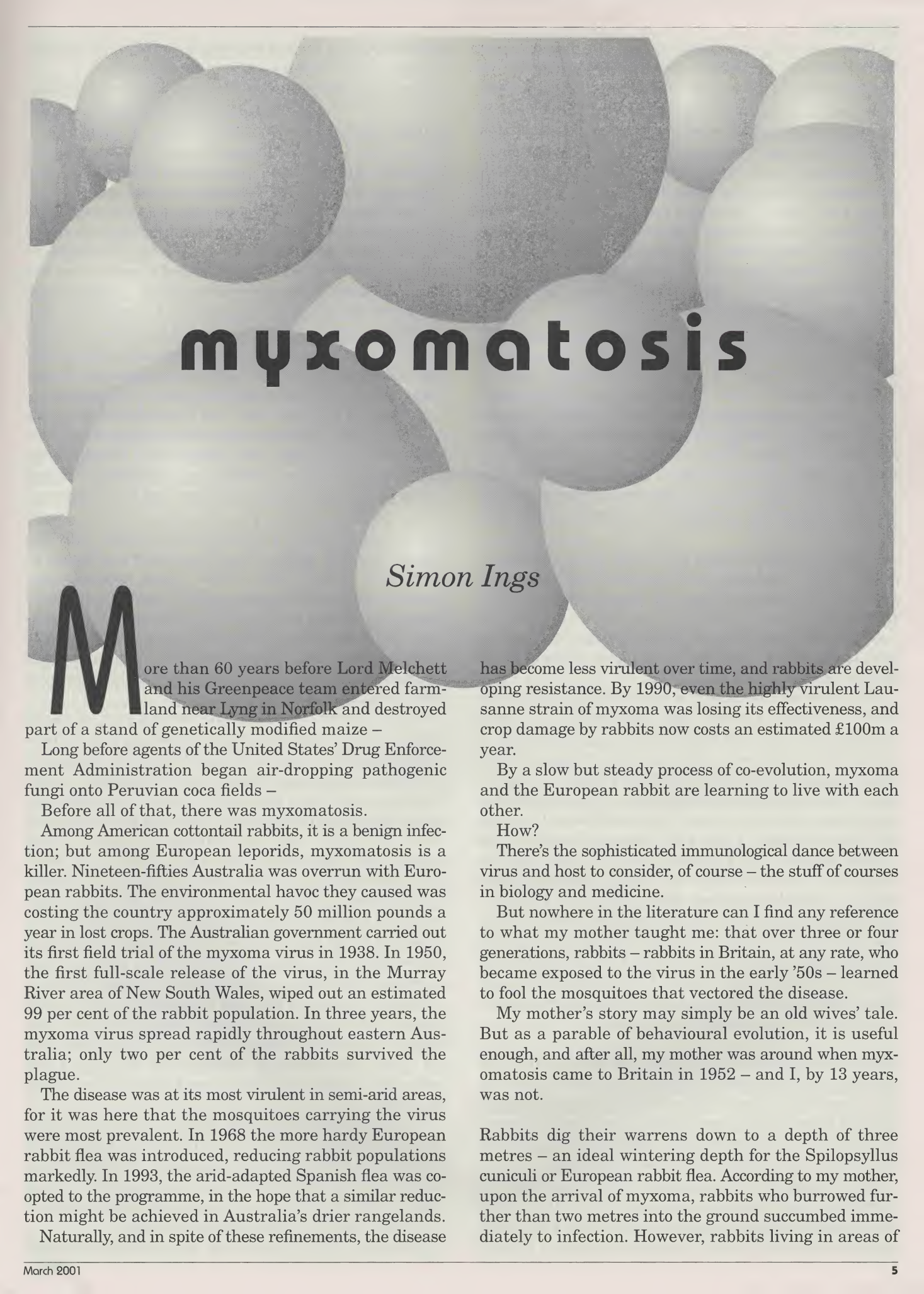
It was more than two years ago that I suggested to David Pringle that we did a special millennium issue for January 2001 – an interview with Arthur C. Clarke would be ideal: but he rightly pointed out that everyone would be doing that. So I thought we ought to go for someone else of equal stature. *Interzone* has run special features on Aldiss and Ballard before, we had featured Moorcock quite a lot just recently, Wyndham was long dead, and both Brunner and Roberts recently gone. So I dusted off an ambition that I had long nurtured (which I was probably unconsciously working towards all along) – to interview John Christopher. We got in touch, but, due to a number of circumstances, the interview didn't take place until November 2000, which is why it is appearing in the March rather than the January issue.

Not that the delay matters. Given the choice between celebrating the proper new millennium or one of my favourite writers, I would choose the latter every time. Measurement systems are our servants, not our masters. Who cares what the date on the front of the magazine is? The important thing is that we have the chance to reconsider the life and works of one of our greatest living writers. And I am not alone. I was astonished at the enthusiasm other people showed when I talked about this project. Also, coincident with the appearance of this interview, there is a new John Christopher novel being serialized, and several of his earlier books are being republished in the USA. It seems John Christopher is once again being accorded the attention his writing merits, and it has been a privilege to play a small part in that process.

All that remains for me to do is thank my wife, Juliet (that's us on the left – I'm the fat one), for all her support (for instance, it was her idea that Matt Colborn should illustrate his own story, but generally without her this issue might never have been completed); Sam and Jessica Youd for their hospitality, and Sam for his patience with the editing process; and David Pringle for once again allowing me to be guest editor here.

Paul Brazier





myxomatosis

Simon Ings

More than 60 years before Lord Melchett and his Greenpeace team entered farmland near Lyng in Norfolk and destroyed part of a stand of genetically modified maize –

Long before agents of the United States' Drug Enforcement Administration began air-dropping pathogenic fungi onto Peruvian coca fields –

Before all of that, there was myxomatosis.

Among American cottontail rabbits, it is a benign infection; but among European leporids, myxomatosis is a killer. Nineteen-fifties Australia was overrun with European rabbits. The environmental havoc they caused was costing the country approximately 50 million pounds a year in lost crops. The Australian government carried out its first field trial of the myxoma virus in 1938. In 1950, the first full-scale release of the virus, in the Murray River area of New South Wales, wiped out an estimated 99 per cent of the rabbit population. In three years, the myxoma virus spread rapidly throughout eastern Australia; only two per cent of the rabbits survived the plague.

The disease was at its most virulent in semi-arid areas, for it was here that the mosquitoes carrying the virus were most prevalent. In 1968 the more hardy European rabbit flea was introduced, reducing rabbit populations markedly. In 1993, the arid-adapted Spanish flea was co-opted to the programme, in the hope that a similar reduction might be achieved in Australia's drier rangelands.

Naturally, and in spite of these refinements, the disease

has become less virulent over time, and rabbits are developing resistance. By 1990, even the highly virulent Lausanne strain of myxoma was losing its effectiveness, and crop damage by rabbits now costs an estimated £100m a year.

By a slow but steady process of co-evolution, myxoma and the European rabbit are learning to live with each other.

How?

There's the sophisticated immunological dance between virus and host to consider, of course – the stuff of courses in biology and medicine.

But nowhere in the literature can I find any reference to what my mother taught me: that over three or four generations, rabbits – rabbits in Britain, at any rate, who became exposed to the virus in the early '50s – learned to fool the mosquitoes that vectored the disease.

My mother's story may simply be an old wives' tale. But as a parable of behavioural evolution, it is useful enough, and after all, my mother was around when myxomatosis came to Britain in 1952 – and I, by 13 years, was not.

Rabbits dig their warrens down to a depth of three metres – an ideal wintering depth for the *Spilopsyllus cuniculi* or European rabbit flea. According to my mother, upon the arrival of myxoma, rabbits who burrowed further than two metres into the ground succumbed immediately to infection. However, rabbits living in areas of

shallow soil – the chalkland of our own home in the South Downs, for example – had long ago learned to dig shallow runs not more than a metre deep. These rabbits continued to proliferate, building shallow burrows even in areas of deep soil, where the myxoma virus had cleared the ground for a massive territorial expansion.

According to my mother, rabbits learned to co-exist with the myxoma virus by changing their burrowing behaviour. When I say “learn,” however, I am simply adopting what evolutionary biologists call “the intentional stance” – I am speaking metaphorically, using the term “learn” to stand in for the unthinking processes of natural selection – the way deep-burrowing rabbits die *en masse*, leaving the field open for shallow-burrowing rabbits.

It is a wasteful process, and animals that are good imitators can sidestep it. Good imitators can change their behaviour in a way that rabbits and their ilk cannot. Humans, being the best imitators of all, stand an excellent chance of survival when disaster strikes, because individuals can immediately adapt their behaviour to suit the new conditions. They can then communicate their change in behaviour to others (“*Don’t eat the beef!*”).

In this way, behavioural adaptation is achieved within a single generation, avoiding the mass death of maladapted individuals.

This, anyway, is what we tell ourselves. Let us hope it is true. If, like the hapless rabbit, we are too dumb to recognize the disaster for what it is, then surely we will be overcome.

My mother moved away some years ago, so it was an easy thing, when I promised myself that I would never go back to my birthplace.

But being born so close to a major arterial route – the A3(M) between London and Portsmouth – it was inevitable that one day I would have to pass through. A journalistic assignment – if you can call it that: covering Keith Chegwin’s *It’s a Knockout* for *TV Times* – required that I drive from London to Southsea. Heavy traffic distracted me on the way down, but coming home I was relatively unimpeded. I glued the Renault Espace to the middle lane, and fixed my gaze to the horizon, inviting strabismus, hypnosis, fatigue and – their much-touted outcome – a mangled and fiery death. But try as I might, I could not altogether filter out the road signs as they passed. Haslemere, Godalming, the Meons: the names wreaked their nostalgic worst, and when I got home I rang Ian. He invited me down for the weekend, and by then it was too late. I had not realized that I still felt beholden towards him. Surprised and powerless, I accepted.

Before the agribusinesses stripped out the meadows and grubbed up the woods, the South Downs were enchanting: the stuff of Tolkien’s Shire. Rolling, rain-soaked, well-drained slopes, valleys boxed off into tiny, irregular rooms by overgrown hedgerows, lanes choked with Old Man’s Beard and cow parsley; the gorse-scented tops.

But the hills have been scrubbed clean, long since. It’s a modern, monochrome landscape now. The soil is so thin here, modern ploughs cut great gobbets out of the chalk bed and leave the fields flecked white and grey. From a

distance, it’s as though someone’s gone over it all with sandpaper, revealing a grey primer beneath.

The crops, when they come, are a sickly yellow-green. They round off the imperfections of the hedgeless hills, leaving them as smooth as the features on a golf course. With all the flavour and texture ripped out, now only the geometry of the hills can move the traveller’s heart, and then only when driven through at speed.

Horndean. It’s not a village so much as a line of ribbon development, which straggles meaninglessly along the old and long since bypassed main road. You drive for miles by lawns of tall dead grass and glimpse, now and again, far away down crazy-paving drives, houses of peeling green pressboard and untreated corrugated iron, sheds on concrete stilts surrounded by fences of rusted chicken wire; sometimes knee-high walls, their bricks Post Office red with a thick poisonous resin, the mortar white, a kitsch criss-cross. Hand painted. Madness.

As soon as I hit the slip road my body did the navigating for me, leading me from one conifer-hedged ’60s bungalow to the next, until the sprawl straggled out finally, and the hill was exactly as I remembered it, and White Dirt Lane only more shallow, and less overgrown.

For as long as I have known him, Ian has been preparing for disaster. From a long line of naval officers, he joined the service from school as an engineer and resigned early, just two years after his graduation, fully equipped with the knowledge to build his Scottish hideaway. This was a project he had begun at school, with pencilled illustrations thrown down on rough paper while sitting at the back of English classes – surreptitiously but with a draftsmanlike skill.

I have known Ian since the second year of senior school, which in our case was an unexceptional State-aided grammar on the outskirts of Petersfield. Ian shared my passion for science fiction: for Philip Dick and Ray Bradbury and Frank Herbert. But as we grew older, my tastes leaned more towards the British fantastical tradition of Arthur Machen, Robert Holdstock, Keith Roberts and Christopher Priest. Ian, on the other hand, preferred the rugged, survivalist literature then coming out of America: Niven, and Pournelle, and Bear, their narrative surfaces shiny enough, but with political roots entwined in the loam of Howard’s barbarous Conan and Burroughs’s Ape Man. Ultimately, Ian kneels – consciously or otherwise – at the altar of the Last Mohican.

When I arrived, I was not surprised to find the old impulse driving him still, though adapted to current conditions. He lived in a house at the top of White Dirt Lane, set apart from others by large scruffy gardens of considerable vintage – trees swallowed much of his acreage in shade.

Ian enjoyed gardening: the shelves in his comfortably cluttered living room were littered with books (mainly TV tie-ins) and BBC gardening magazines. Stacked beside his monstrous old television, tall stacks of home-taped videos of *The Food Programme* swayed, as though about to topple, whenever you crossed the room.

Ian was a Monty Don fan. He was creating an organic

garden, following religiously the strictures of the Dons' *From Fork to Table*. He had already set brick paths into the raw earth at the back of the house, marking the outlines of an old-fashioned potager.

"I'm going to be self-sufficient," he told me, rubbing Swarfega into his dirt-blackened hands. This was a deflection from his schoolboy plan to build an underground hideaway on the Scottish island of Skye, surrounded by impenetrable blackthorn thickets. I was, as usual, provoked.

"Why?" I said.

As a child, Ian imagined himself the last man alive, and with no need of, or even appetite for, woman. But puberty hit him hard, wounding him far deeper than it should, and taking away more than it bestowed; left him, in the end, cruelly scarred – scarred for life, I mean – by acne, and tongue-tied around women he might worship endlessly, but rarely love.

On leaving the Navy, he joined a road protesters' camp on Twyford Down, and there he met the love of his life, Gabby. She came from Bristol, where her parents were keen rock climbers. It was from them she'd picked up the skills to build tree-houses and walkways for the camp, and from whom she'd purloined about 500 quid's worth of harnesses, belays and rope. Gabby and Ian seemed made for each other.

Gabby's parents had jobs, money, two cars, and fond memories of the '60s; they used to turn up at the camp at weekends and embarrass the hell out of her by handing out fist-sized bottles of supermarket Biere d'Alsace and playing Leonard Cohen songs on the Volvo's CD player. It was like they wanted to show her how to rebel properly, she said.

She had a very fat behind, and would regularly grind herself into Ian's lap – even in the taxi back from the pub. I still remember from my infrequent visits to see them, how disgusted I was by her, and at the same time, how jealously I coveted her. She was the fattest beautiful woman I had ever met.

We were in our mid-20s by then. I had just moved to London to kickstart my patchy literary career. Gabby left the West Country for Hampshire and moved in with Ian.

Ian adapted his survivalist plans as best he could to accommodate such unexpected happiness. He put in an offer on a Bed and Breakfast on the island of Skye. It was his Scottish hideaway still, still his one-man castle, but strangely domesticated. Out come the blackthorn thickets. The hideaway rises from beneath its camouflage of furze, dons a slate roof, and shakes the soil from its dry-stone flanks. Concealed iron gates fall away from the brightly painted doors, arrow slits became sunny bay windows; one imagines a sign saying VACANCIES, hanging from a plastic nipple, suckered to the glass.

Ian's offer on the property was accepted, and then he withdrew it at the eleventh hour, when Gabby announced that she was pregnant.

They bought instead the house on White Dirt Lane – an easy commute to their jobs in Portsmouth. This is the house Ian still occupies, and to which I so recently came,

drawn by an easy and insidious nostalgia.

From Ian's living room, you looked across the neighbouring churchyard to a common bordered by flint walls and, beyond that, a line of trees. But the view was deceptive. Urban sprawl had eaten its way north from Waterlooville and Cowplain through most of the places we used to play as schoolfriends. Come Saturday afternoon, Ian invited me on a walk we had enjoyed many times, to a pub I remembered. I found myself being led through new housing estates and over busy by-passes to marred panoramas I remember we had once reached by traipsing through fields and wooded lanes and ill-marked tracks round the edges of fields stuffed with corn and cabbages. "What the hell's happened here?" I said, expecting a grunt of agreement.

But Ian was bewildered. "What?"

"This place."

"I thought you liked it."

Behind his eyes, Ian still saw things as they used to be. For him, these walks were still country rambles. He was like those big cats you see in zoos; they cannot change their behaviour to suit captivity, but must be pacing up and down endlessly, looking for a way through the thicket of iron bars and steel netting that entraps them. They just get sadder and sadder.

Even the pubs weren't the same. When we reached our quarry on this occasion, it turned out to have been bought up by a chain. Its snugs and horse-brasses had all been ripped out to make way for scrubbed pine benches and wine in designer labels behind the bar. But Ian still drank here, seeing, perhaps, behind his eyes, the fug – and tasting, in the back of his mouth, the cider – of his adolescence.

"I'm going to be self-sufficient," he said.

He said he wanted to do his bit to save the planet.

It was like listening to a 15-year-old.

Not even that; I actually preferred the arguments he had come out with at 15 – his schoolboy belief that it was necessary for us all to acquire survival skills, should the fragile protections of modern society collapse within our lifetime. There was, at the very least, a rigour to it.

Saving the planet?

It was as though, along with his plans for a Scottish hideaway, Ian had allowed domestication to soften the very survivor in him. Did he seriously imagine that disaster might be averted; averted, at that, by forms of human co-operation?

Or had his dreams of a glorious and savage survival been eaten away by the common death-wish – Thanatos™, eagerly embraced after a lifetime of barren post-industrial leisure; Thanatos.com, bringing to a definitive close at last the otherwise eternal torments of soap superbitches, boy bands, imported sitcoms, sexual panics, and all the myriad Wastes of Time and Public Money through which the consumer of modern reality must slog?

I imagined Ian swelling by one the ranks of the little martyrs, the Sunday eco-warriors, the tweedy vegetarians who take used carrier bags with them when they drive to Tesco in search of organic salad. I imagined the future: a planetary corpse in an I Told You So T-shirt.

And I wondered how it was possible that the planet's best imitator could not only fail to see disaster looming upon us; but could actually cause the disaster, *be* the disaster. And thinking this, I recalled, with no small degree of embarrassment, how unoriginal a speculation this was.

John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* was first published in 1956, by Michael Joseph. It tells the story of a man's journey from London to a valley hideaway owned by his brother, on the occasion of a planetary calamity – the viral eradication of all grasses. *Grass* bears comparison with the post-apocalyptic novels of John Wyndham, but is more graphic in its depiction of society's collapse; for this reason alone, perhaps, it is less celebrated.

Grass is no longer in print. I own a 1963 Penguin paperback edition. The cover features a strikingly crude woodcut. In the foreground lies the skeleton of a cow. Behind it, on a barren hill, lies the burning wreckage of a farmhouse. On the skyline, marches a column of ten people carrying what may be guns, but might as easily be spears.

A moment's extra study reveals an evocative and pathetic detail (drawn, in fact, from Christopher's text): one of the figures is not armed after all, but wheels a pram piled high with domestic goods.

Grass stands up well to a present-day reading. Christopher's descriptions of his speculative *Salvia*-slaughtering virus have dated, naturally, but the science itself is robust enough. Indeed, the story's premise seems all too credible, given current anxieties over the genetic modification of food-stuffs.

There is a single, massive omission, outrageous enough in the 1950, and downright perverse today: nowhere does Christopher consider the effects of erosion. The barren soils cling marvellously and preternaturally to the grades and chinks of Christopher's imaginary landscape.

But Christopher's focus, and the book's lasting value, lies elsewhere: in the sympathetic account of how an ordinary, likeable family man becomes an ordinary, likeable mass-murderer, intruder, kidnapper and procurer of children, fratricide and – finally – a King. By such terrible stages does modern society collapse and reform itself upon the feudal lines that pertain under Christopher's new conditions.

And readers, even as they are horrified by John Cusance's moral collapse, will find themselves willing it on – because if John doesn't adapt, disaster will overtake and destroy him, his family, and his followers.

"Before all this is over... are we going to hate ourselves?"

Sunday's walk was little better than Saturday's, but at least the pub had a passable garden. We sat outside, though the sky was overcast. Chill gusts blew this way and that like birds, preparing to flock. Baby catastrophes, already they were conspiring, joining forces, planning

how they might yet tear off a roof, or fell a tree upon a child, or crush an old man in his caravan.

The landlord kept a pet pig, which was let free to roam around the garden. It was one of those Korean pot-bellied numbers. It took a fancy to me. It made these sucky-sucky noises. I had to keep batting it away with my *Guardian*. Eventually I relented and fed it my crisps. Canadian ham.

"That's sick," Ian said.

"But that was a foreign country, and besides, the lady is dead."

"Is that supposed to be a quotation?"

I made to reply, but seeing him, the words died in my throat. By the look in his eyes I knew that, even now, he would not forgive me.

Nichola is six years old and – beyond a sentimental concern for the smaller, furrier farmyard animals, which she

will not eat – she embraces all present dispensations: she watches endless reruns of Playdays on the video; she dances precociously to *I'm a Barbie Girl* on the radio; in the supermarket, if you offer her Cheesy Dippers, she exclaims, in tones of Bate-manesque outrage, "Not Cheesy Dippers – CHEESE Dippers!"

She has yet to discover real food. The nearest she comes to it is bread, which she smothers in chocolate and hazelnut paste. The rest is all DairyLea Lunchables and Penguin b-b-b-biscuits. KP Knuts. Nabisco's Fishy Moments. God knows.

She is, quite simply, learning the survival strategies that pertain to a six-year-old middle-class white girl in East Dulwich. I watch her from the kitchen window, sipping meagrely from a glass of

London tapwater.

She is splashing about in her paddling pool: Gabby slaps the water and makes her squeal.

Gabby comes in for a towel, and sees me watching.

Gabby stands at the kitchen door. She has lost a lot of weight. She is still very beautiful.

"What are you doing?" she says.

"What are you doing here?"

I pour the water away and set the glass carefully on the draining board.

"Get out," she says, "before I call the police."

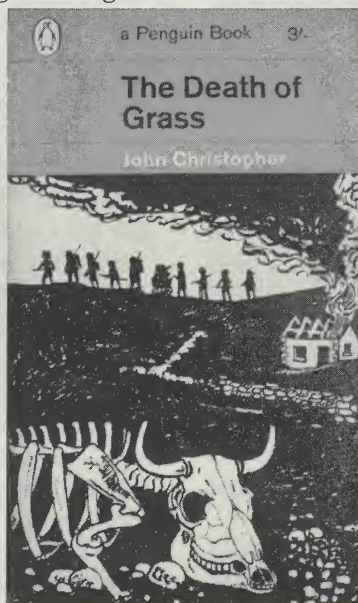
Despite its extraordinary talent for imitation, the human species sprawls helpless before the environmental disaster currently overtaking it.

"Fuck off. Fuck off!"

This is because – however good we are at imitating, we have evolved to prefer only those behaviours which afford us some immediate satisfaction.

It's hard enough to give up smoking: but what if you were asked to – *give up everything*?

Give up travel, outside of the well-trodden track to the well and back? Give up music, outside of the drone of some country idiot, high up in his favourite tree, buzzing



on a grass stalk? Give up knowledge, outside of the lies of a mendicant priest, squatted conceitedly upon the curved spine of his frail ass? Give up cheesy dippers? Give up the pill? Give up the band-aid? Give up oral hygiene? Give up 40 of your 70 years of likely life?

"How did you get in?" She has changed the locks and thinks this will suffice. She has no idea how baroque her survival strategies are – and how fragile.

Outside, my daughter has seen. She is at the window now, looking in at us, at me: I hear her calling for me.

Strange how, even barricaded as we were, against Ian's betrayal and anger, and the opprobrium of our friends, Gabby and I could not agree upon our strategies. Strange how, tied as we were straight away by bonds of parenthood, our communication failed to birth a single shared behaviour.

"Don't ever come back here!" she shouts.

Outside, her skin blue with cold, a little girl screams for her daddy.

Distressing as this is, it is important that Nichola continues to see me at regular intervals throughout her growing up, court order or no court order. I cannot afford the risk that she will not trust me, come the day that I carry her away to safety.

Gabby suspects nothing of this, obvious as it is, little as I do to disguise it. Dear Gabby, who, too weak to contemplate survival, wraps herself in protest: a Greenpeace sticker bleaching to grey behind the frosted glass of our front door.

"The thing all you adult, sensitive people must bear in mind is that things are on your side at present – you live in a world where everything's in favour of being sensitive and civilized. But it's a precarious business."

This, or something like it – a modern paraphrase – makes up the bulk of my reply, and I am once again reminded of how painfully unoriginal this sentiment has become: abstract as the sound of a tree falling in a rain-forest, spent as an infant's asthmatic gasp.

We can imitate, but few of us imitate the right things – fewer every day it seems, as we fall prey to adulthood, and lovers, to families, and ordinary happiness.

Anyone want to give up happiness?

Gabby, mother of my Nichola, does not. Our tantrums spent, she leads me to the door.

She studies the lock, unnerved still by my burglar's skills, and, by extension, all the brutal lore I live by, which she will not learn.

"Fuck off back to Skye," she says.

Simon Ings was delighted to be invited to write a John Christopher tribute. He says, "I sidestepped *The Tripods* trilogy entirely and cut my teeth on *The Prince in Waiting* – if I ever read a love story before this one, I can't remember it. It's his grasp of pride and shame and desire, more than the moral terrorism of *The Death of Grass*, that I savour most. You can't nurture the one away from the loam of the other." Simon Ings's crime novel *Painkillers* is published by Bloomsbury.



PARALLAX VIEW

Keith Brooke & Eric Brown

foreword by Stephen Baxter

illustrations by Dominic Harman

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Illustration by Dominic Harman

The company tried to persuade me to take a long holiday when Helen was drowned, but in the end they accepted my argument that I needed work more than rest. They put the proposition up again six months later. I was asked to spend the weekend with the Ashtons, and along with hospitality Freddy and Paula applied friendly but persistent pressure. My initial prescription had, they agreed, quite probably been right. At the same time the body, like the mind, had limitations, and I had been driving mine too hard. What I was heading for, Paula pointed out gently, was nothing romantic: merely a coronary and years of enforced idleness, possibly helplessness. By this time, of course, things had changed with me. The wound, once viciously tender, had scarred over. The scar ached, but bearably. Freddy told me they had booked me for a cruise to the Cape in ten days' time, and I did not argue with him.

I spent the journey out in a torpor which I think I cultivated deliberately as a defence against associating with my fellow passengers. Since Helen's death, I had seen people in one context only, that of work. It was disturbing and frightening to contemplate them in their reality as individuals: they were pointers to pointlessness. I, drank a fair deal, but on my own. We moved from cold grey seas and skies to light and warmth and blueness, and I sat on my stool at the end of the bar. I was quietly drunk every night, and not completely sober after eleven in the morning. I did not go ashore with the others when we docked. The Chief Purser had a tactful word or two

with me, and told me about some of the interesting things to see and do in South Africa, but he fairly soon abandoned the attempt to make me see reason. He gave the impression of having met my kind before.

It was on the return journey that I met Cynthia Parker. I was at my usual place in the bar one morning, and was lighting a cigarette when a voice spoke just behind me. I spun round, holding the burning match, and saw her shrink from it.

I said: "I'm sorry."

"It's silly." She had a strong, rather pleasantly harsh voice. "I've been nervous of flame from a child. Even a match. I was asking you if this stool was free."

I bought her a brandy and ginger ale, and within a quarter of an hour she was through the wall of uncooperative blankness which had so successfully kept the others away. She had the unhesitating directness of someone with supreme confidence in herself. She had striking looks: the embers, glowing and capable of firing with a smile, of great beauty. She was, as she told me in that first 15 minutes, 68.

It was on the face of it an odd association, even by shipboard standards. Apart from the almost 30 years between us, we had few things in common. I was a dull businessman, who had worked long hours in my youth and come up, as they say, the hard way. Only with Helen had I learned anything of the refinements of life, and then for no more than three bitterly short years. Cynthia, on the other hand, had been born into luxury, and had

lived in it ever since. She had been married three times, divorcing one husband and surviving two. I got the impression that they had all been wealthy men and that she was a very wealthy woman.

She was a good talker and a keen listener, and the brisk way in which she had forced through the barriers I had put up was flattering. Moreover, she offered femininity without sex, the ideal solace for a man in the mood I was in. What she saw in me was more difficult to establish. Not just an escape from loneliness, at any rate. She had never been a lonely woman, and was not likely to be.

She was a hard but not excessive drinker. She part-weaned me from the bar, and many hours that I would otherwise have spent getting drunk were occupied in our lying side by side on the sun-deck, watching the waves and talking. The first two days I talked about my work and about my childhood. On the third, I talked about Helen. She listened, and said eventually:

"So that was it. I wondered what it was that was sitting on your back, crippling you."

She spoke as a doctor might, pleased with unravelling a difficult case. Strangely enough that, and the absence of the artificial expressions of condolence that I had grown used to, was refreshing. Sympathy with grief is presumptive, a claim to kinship. She, as far as her reaction was concerned, might never have known sorrow for human loss. That which was a devil to me was to her no more than a curious beastie, a phantasm.

She told me about her own beastie that evening, after dinner.

We went to the bar for a nightcap, and she was in fine form, talking scathingly about our fellow passengers who had come under her shrewd and wicked eye. To one who, as she did, lived so intensely in the world, the whole escape notion of cruising was anathema. Time-wasting, in any class or context, she could neither understand nor tolerate. There was no difference to her between the elegantly groomed and dressed men and women who surrounded us, and the young men and women, in Mod or Rocker dress, who lounged vacuously in coffee bars or at street corners. They were all decadent, all contemptible.

I saw, I thought, a weakness in her diatribe, and seized on it. After all, she was here with them. She had told me she lived chiefly in the United States, had been visiting a married sister near Johannesburg, and needed to go to London to attend to business matters. I pointed out that she need not have joined our cruise ship. She could have flown to London instead, and the trip would have taken hours, instead of days.

She paused before replying and then nodded to the barman, who brought us more drinks. She said:

"I've never flown in my life, and never will."

One meets, of course, old ladies who cannot attune themselves to modern developments, but the description was a long way from fitting her. She had told me she kept

a Thunderbird at home, and was fond of speedboat racing. The firm quiet negative over air travel made me curious. I asked her:

"Why not?"

She took her drink, lifted it, and stared at me over the rim of the glass.

"Through fear," she said.

I shook my head. "Not convincing."

There was silence again, and I thought she was shying away from the subject. But after a time she began to speak, in a low voice, and I listened.

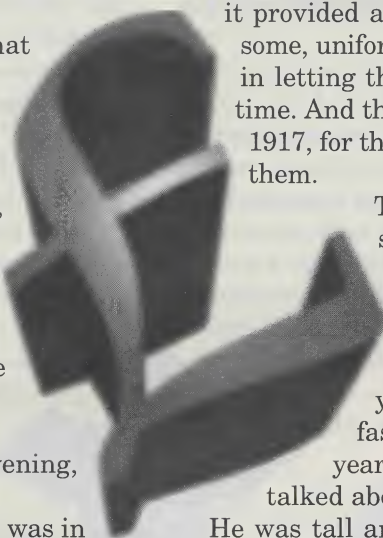
It went back nearly 50 years, to the time when the First War was dragging and grinding itself slowly on and she was a young woman, a girl, of 18. She had been surrounded by admirers since the schoolroom, and could have been expected to have a brilliant season. The war was a bore from that point of view. On the other hand, it provided a never-ending supply of young, handsome, uniformed men, and a sense of patriotic duty in letting them take her out and give her a good time. And there were good times to be had, even in 1917, for those who had the means of commanding them.

There were dozens of young men, and some she was sorrier to see go than others, but none made much impression on her before Tony Anderson came along. I doubt if she loved him because I doubt if she ever was able to yield control to that extent, but she was fascinated by him and the fascination, 48 years later, was still evident in the way she talked about him.

He was tall and swarthy, with a fierce black moustache, a slightly hooked nose and deep blue eyes. He had great physical strength and magnetism: the first time she shook hands with him she was made aware of both. Besides these, he had other impressive qualities. He was the grandson of a Duke, the son of one of the better steel millionaires. In her parents' eyes, as in her own, he was entirely eligible. They were engaged six weeks after they met, and at that had been marking time for four.

She had sensed a wildness in him, and it had attracted her, but it was only by degrees that she understood how deep the wildness went. He was a man of whims, and iron-willed about indulging them. He decided to buy her a diamond bracelet at one o'clock in the morning, and had the proprietor of a Bond Street shop called from his bed and brought in a taxi to serve him. He took her for a picnic on the river – just the two of them, with champagne on ice and a Fortnum's hamper – and as they tied up by a small island on a deserted reach the air was full of soft sweet sounds: the entire string section of the Royal London Orchestra. All this was flattering and exciting; and a little frightening. Because where he gave, he claimed.

And giving himself totally, he demanded the same of her. He told her this plainly. She was his, he said, for eternity. She shivered inside, and smiled, and said:



"You're very romantic, darling, for all that solid English ancestry. The Prayer Book only says till death us do part."

The blue eyes fixed her, the strong full mouth was unsmiling. He stared at her, and said:

"Let me tell you a story."

"A romantic one?"

"If you like. About my grandmother."

His grandmother had been the daughter of a peer, and engaged to a Duke. Her father was appointed Ambassador to the Court of the Emperor in Vienna, and she went there with him. She met – no one quite knew how – a young Hungarian. He was completely undesirable; not only a revolutionary, but a gypsy. They fell in love. As the date of her marriage drew near, she found herself pregnant. She told her lover, and he was delighted. They would elope together and live at peace in a peaceful land. Perhaps America. She was his and he was hers. He had faith in her and in their love.

But she was weak, and afraid of what was happening to her. She confessed to her father, and he took the story to the Duke. The Duke was a realist. He was also poor, for a Duke, while her father, though only a Baron, was rich. Her dowry, already impressive, was generously, magnificently increased. The wedding took place, as arranged, and the happy couple went to live in a quiet remote villa in Switzerland. Her child was born there, and was a girl. Everything had worked out even better than had been hoped. The future of the family was safe; and there was time for her to have sons.

Or there would have been time, if she had lived.

Her father was still Ambassador. They visited Vienna in the spring, almost a year after she had left the place and her lover. They did not stay at the Embassy, but at a small hunting lodge in the woods. It was the place to which her lover had been taken by the Duke's men. The marital bed was set up in the room in which, while two men held his arms, the Duke had stabbed him to death. He was saving this up to tell her the next morning for, like all realists, he prided himself on his sense of humour. The Duchess retired early, while the Duke drank his port. When he went up to her she was dead, covered with congealed blood from the stab wound in her breast.

Cynthia paused at this stage, and I ordered her another drink.

"Gruesome," I said, "and Gothic, but not altogether unlikely. She had killed herself?"

"No. Why should she? She had no idea her lover was not still alive. That very day she had asked a maid to make enquiries for him. She was safe, and could afford to be romantic again. And besides, she was a coward who could not stand the sight of blood."

"Then her husband killed her."

"Not that, either. There was a reversion clause in the dowry, and the bulk of the money went in trust to her daughter. Though he was under suspicion, for a time. You

see, there was no trace of the dagger."

"Then ...?"

"A burglar, the police decided. An unknown man who had come in, surprised the Duchess in her bed, and killed her to stop her raising the alarm. And then fled."

I sipped my brandy. "It sounds reasonable."

"That's what I said."

"But he – your fiancé – didn't agree?"

"He was a quarter gypsy, remember. That was the part of his ancestry which fascinated him, not the rest. He had gone to Hungary, found the tribe, lived with them for a time. He had learned their beliefs. One was that violent death tied the spirit to the spot in which death came. And that where there had been great love, or great hate, the spirit could make its claim whenever the person who had inspired it passed that way. It was a belief that had its social value. In cases of murder, suspects were bound and left in the place where the murder had occurred. It was not unusual for them to be found dead the next morning."

"Not surprising, either," I said. "So his view was that his gypsy ancestor had come back to claim his faithless love? And had stabbed her to death with a ghostly knife?"

"Yes. He believed that."

"You still haven't told me why you are afraid of travelling by air."

"He was a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps. Those were the days of the Zeppelins over London. A few nights later, he attacked one and brought it down in flames. It was a

very daring attack, pressed beyond the limits of ordinary courage. Quite reckless. He came down, burning, with the Zeppelin. They gave him a Victoria Cross posthumously."

"Even now, I don't understand."

She said slowly: "He told me that I was his, belonging to him through life and beyond death. When he told me about his grandfather and grandmother, he meant that he would come for me, if I betrayed him. And I did betray him." Her still magnificent eyes fixed on mine. "I was pregnant, too. Within a month of his death I gave myself, and his son, to another man."

I protested. "How can you call that betrayal? You had nothing to do with his death."

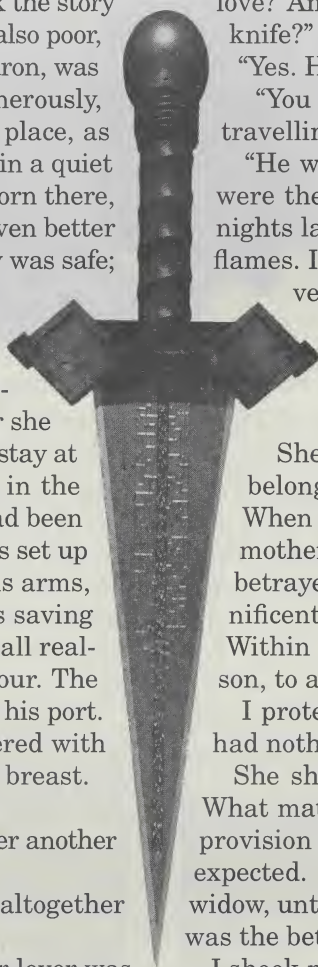
She shrugged. "His death did not matter to him. What mattered was his love, his pride. He had made provision for me, in case of his death. I know what he expected. That I should bear his son and live as his widow, until death reunited us. I married instead. That was the betrayal."

I shook my head. "And you think, because of that..."

"He died in the air. If he waits anywhere, it is there. I can face death as well as most, I think. But not death in a burning aircraft. Not death and him together."

"Nearly 50 years ago," I said. "And based on a melodrama 50 years older than that."

"What is 50 years?" She stared at the meaningless array of bottles behind the bar. "I remember him better than I will remember you, the day after we leave this ship."



We said goodbye at Southampton, with no expectation of meeting again. Nor did we. I went back to my work. I thought of her at times, in the quiet hours of the night when, not being able to sleep, I went downstairs to commune with a bottle of whisky. It was the irony of it that struck me most. Two people meeting on shipboard, with nothing in common but a preoccupation with death. One wishing the dead could rest, but fearing their survival. The other willing to give anything to call them back, but knowing they were dead indeed.

Then, by chance, I saw her name in a newspaper, and read the story in which it appeared. And the following day I resigned my job, and came down here.

I have a room in a boarding house in Poole, but I spend little time there. The boat I have got is a small but sturdy one, and I take her out in all but the worst of weathers.

It happened not far outside the harbour – not more than a mile out. A sudden squall, and the friends Helen was with were not as skilled as they should have been in the handling of a boat like that. She capsized, and the man who skippered her managed to swim to shore. The others did not. I could not trust myself to speak to him then, and still cannot.

But at least there is hope now or, if not hope, a dream to follow. The story in the newspaper was about Cynthia, and about her death. She had died in her hotel room, in a fire. It was thought, the story said, that she might have been smoking in bed and fallen asleep.

She did not smoke, though, and she feared all flame, even a match. The hotel proprietors were quick to point out that there had been no negligence on their part. Each floor, each room, was individually fireproofed, the electrical wiring impeccable. It was, after all, a very new hotel. And yet she had died by burning.

For what she had forgotten was that in fifty years the earth had risen to meet the sky. It was a very new hotel, the Metropolitan Towers, and it soared high above the crawling roofs of London. Forty-five floors, and her room was on the 42nd. Say 500 feet. I checked in an old copy of *The Illustrated London News*. The Zeppelin had already been hit and was losing height when its attacker made his last run-in. Down to 500 feet, they estimated, heading west over Mayfair.

It took her nearly 50 years to come, unwillingly, to her trysting place. I have only been here a year, so far. I live modestly, and have the means to do so for a long time yet.

Each day, each tide, is different, but the sea never changes.

John Christopher last appeared in *IZ 44* with a story, "A Journey South," reclaimed from Harlan Ellison's so-far still unpublished *Last Dangerous Visions*. The above story first appeared in John Burke's *Tales of Unease* in 1966. He is interviewed on subsequent pages, and many of the stories in this issue celebrate his influence.



Our current issue features the first part of a new novel by **John Christopher**, 'Bad Dream', and short fiction from **Eric Brown**, **Mary Soon Lee** and the late **Keith Roberts** (a new 'Kaeti' novelette). Our next issue (February, 2001) will feature 'Glacial', a new 'Conjoiner' novella by **Alastair Reynolds**, 'Poppy Day', a new 'Peninsula' novelette by **Michael Coney** as well as the serial and other short fiction. Also, still available:

SPECTRUM SF 3, August 2000

This issue contains the stunning conclusion to **Keith Roberts'** novel 'Drek Yarman', and long novelettes from **Eric Brown** and **Charles Stross** (the chilling 'A Colder War' – no pun intended!) plus a short story from **Jack Deighton**.

SPECTRUM SF 2, April 2000

A new novella from **Eric Brown** ('Destiny on Tartarus', the first story in his 'Fall of Tartarus' sequence but complete on its own). Short stories from **Jack Deighton**, **Stephen Baxter & Eric Brown**, **Keith Brooke**, **Stephen Palmer** (a 'Spired Inn' tale) and **Barrington J. Bayley**. Part two of **Keith Roberts'** novel.

SPECTRUM SF 1, February 2000

Features the first part of an unpublished 'Kiteworld' novel from **Keith Roberts**, 'Drek Yarman'. New novelettes from **Charles Stross** and **Alastair Reynolds** ('Great Wall of Mars', part of his Coalition-Conjoiner series). Short stories from **Eric Brown & Keith Brooke** ('Mind's Eye', their best collaboration yet) and **Garry Kilworth**.

Each issue also has an editorial, competitions and a review column called The Archive. An occasional letter column started in issue #3.

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A Lot of Fun Trying...

John Christopher
interviewed by Paul Brazier

John Christopher invited me in and seated me in a spacious and elegant living room that opens to the rear into a large conservatory. While we were waiting for his wife, Jessica, to join us, and he was getting us drinks, there came a loud knocking from the conservatory, but, when I looked, there was no one there. Spooky. It felt like the opening of one of his novels. "That's Jonathan," he explained when he returned, and pointed upwards. On the roof of the conservatory stood a large herring gull, and as I watched, it again banged peremptorily on the roof with its beak. "He's hungry. We haven't fed him today."

John Christopher, born in 1922, was christened Sam Youd – “I added or adapted the rest to make it Christopher Samuel Youd” – and is only addressed as Sam.

“I’m not John, I’m Sam, yes. It’s one of those things. I’ve dodged my identity so long, I get these publishers who call me on the telephone and say, ‘Hello John,’ and I think, shit, who’s John?”

And, despite his first wife and all the children who pronounce the surname “Youd” to rhyme with “food,” he maintains that in Lancashire and Cheshire where his family is from, his surname would commonly be pronounced to rhyme with “cloud,” and that is the pronunciation he prefers. “There’s something southerners find offensive about the diphthong,” he mutters.

He has published a total of 56 novels under a variety of pseudonyms (see accompanying bibliography on page 28) including four as by Stanley Winchester, a previously unrevealed pseudonym that came to light during the planning stages of this interview. His first novel, *The Winter Swan*, as by Christopher Youd, appeared in 1949, and the most recent, *Bad Dream* (as by John Christopher), is currently being serialized in *Spectrum SF*. His first post-war fiction sale was “The Peddler,” to *John Bull* magazine, Feb. 7 1948 –

“We had been lodging with Fanny Craddock, top floor of her house just off Thurloe Square. It ended in acrimony, basically because we couldn’t afford the £5 pw rent. We found a chap offering the quaint old custom of key money, and paid him £115 for the key to a flat on Brixton Hill. Why £115? Because I was a sucker, and he sussed I couldn’t go to £120.

“That was a tough month. *John Bull* paid £18, so we survived.

“In the late forties, my wise and venerable agent, David Higham, hazarded a prediction that I would eventually be able to support myself by writing. ‘When,’ I asked? ‘Ten years, maybe.’ I went back to my clerking job with the Diamond Corporation, somewhat saddened.”

His first sf sale was “The Christmas Roses”, which appeared in *Astounding* for Feb 1949 as “Christmas Tree.” This was quickly followed, in April, by “Colonial”, the first of the “managerial society” stories that were subsequently collected, along with others, including “The Christmas Roses,” in *The 22nd Century* (1954).

“Soon after *The 22nd Century* appeared, Clemence Dane (who had originally infuriated us all by describing sf as “the American fairy story”) was put in charge of a new Michael Joseph venture: *Novels of Tomorrow*. She asked me to contribute, and *The*

Year of the Comet (1955) was one of the two launch-books. She wanted more, and I wrote a book which she rejected. (Later it turned into one of the best I've done: the *Sword* trilogy). I was a hungry writer, so turned to something else. That was *The Death of Grass*, which she graciously accepted."

The Death of Grass (1956) is very English, as are many of the other novels, not merely in setting, but in attitudes. But so is Sam Youd. In the pub where we went for lunch, Sam berated the landlord (an old friend) for selling Beaujolais Nouveau while the French were misbehaving, refusing to buy our beef. Indeed, *Bad Dream*, the most recent novel "hammers that one home," he says. He speculates that part of the reason for this is that he is only half English.

"My mother was Irish – a complicated kind of Irish because she was a southern Irish protestant, but not part of the ascendancy. They were really peasant farmers in County Wicklow. They must have been Cromwellian settlers – he probably put his sergeants or whatever into little farms to keep an eye on the local peasantry. My mother used to say that the rest of her family never had anything to do with any Catholics, but she got on quite well with them, except they used to keep the hens in the parlour. I doubt that's true. It's what she said.

"When I was eleven, my father went into a bin and my mother was left very short, so we moved into a very poor little terraced house. I had just started public school as a scholarship boy, and I was just starting Latin, so she asked me to name the house, and I got it totally wrong: I called it *Pax Domum*, Peace House it was supposed to be. It was not a Peace House at all, it was a very riven house with a lot of

conflict. While he was in this bin she took in lodgers and, because she couldn't afford, I think it was a penny a letter for those bronze things that you got in Woolworths, she got the name plate *Pax Domum* and broke it up, and managed to hammer *Rusty Duff* out of it, I don't know how.

"Well, it must be forty years ago, I went down to find her home in Ireland, the original Rusty Duff, and I found this great uncle of mine there. He was about ninety-seven, and he was really quite extraordinary – he was the foulest-mouthed person I had met, I think, since I had left the army. He went on about the income tax people who used to say to him, 'You must have some money. We know you've got some money.' And he would say, 'Well you fuckin' well find it.' And then he would say, 'And there's me son, and he keeps on about where the money is.' He was sixty-five, the son, and he said, 'I'm not going to tell him, because I'd have no control of him if I did.'

"The farmhouse was a single-storey building that had a thatched roof originally but they'd given up trying to make the thatch go right so they'd put a corrugated iron roof on top. Inside there were bits of thatch dropping down all the time. There were only two rooms as far as I could see. There was a dead rat in the long grass outside. It was really quite bizarre.

"Many years later, Jessica and I went back down there, and we found that the house had been razed to the ground, ready to be made into a modern bungalow. We stopped in the lane and a local woman came along and I said to her, 'Do you know anything about Willy Hawkins, the son,' and she said, 'Ah, Willy. He had a terrible det.' And I thought, if he never found out where the money was he *would*

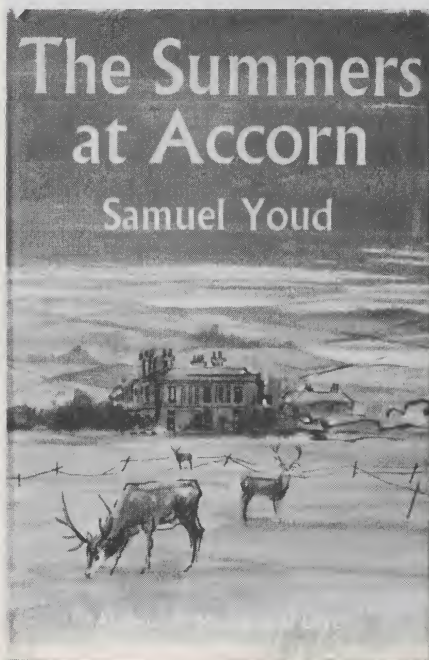
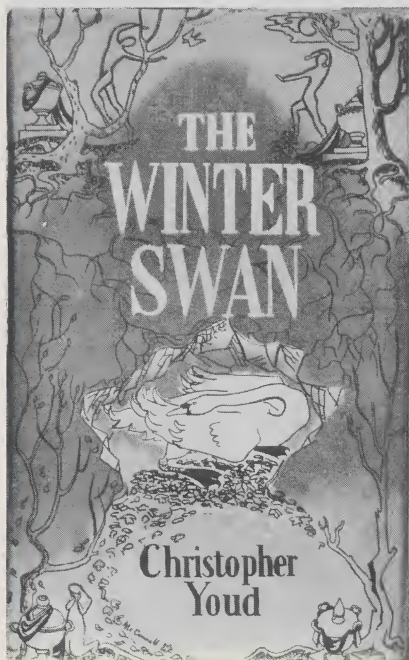
have had a terrible debt, for god's sake, but she said, 'He drove his bicycle into the dung loch and wasn't found for three days!'

"My mother was the youngest of twenty-one children, but her father had used two wives to do this – he had thirteen by the first wife and eight by the second. Her mother was a big woman and he was a little man, so when he got difficult one day she held him up over the washtub and said, 'you may have killed your first wife, but you're not gonna kill me, I can tell you.'

"Anyway, she used to say when she was a baby, her father was working up on the mountainside, and he looked down, and he saw the old sow coming to take the baby – she'd been put out for airing in the sunshine – coming to take the baby out of its cradle, and he came roaring down the hill to save her, because otherwise the old sow would have eaten her. I believed this implicitly, of course, as you do. Then, when I went there, I thought, well, they're not mountains to start with, they're bloody hills, and the nearest one was so far away that he would have had to be an Olympic champion to get anywhere near rescuing a child – and he couldn't have seen her anyway.

"When I used to complain about having to walk to school, which was about three miles, she used to say, 'I used to have to walk four miles, and they're Irish miles, and they're longer than English miles.' When I first went to this place, I did a very unkind thing. I set the clock on the mileometer on the car, and I measured the distance to the local school, and it was one and a quarter miles.

"And she would tell the story about when they'd started to do a little bit better and she, as the youngest, was bought boots. Before that they'd been



barefoot. She went off to school very proud in her new boots and, as she got nearer to the school, she thought, Oh my god, I can't go in there and them all still barefoot. I can't do that. And she had to cross a bridge over the River Slaney, so she took her boots off and hid them under the bridge, thinking that she would come back from school and put them on again, and present herself at home with her new boots. During that day there was a cloudburst, the heavens opened, and she got back and her new boots had been washed away. How she ever got back and told it to her parents I don't know. It's a sad little story."

While this was fascinating, it seemed little to do with Englishness.

"Well it is really; just as Hitler was more German than the Germans; and he was Austrian. Also, the fact is that I got on better with my father than with my mother. I admired my mother, but she had a furious temper. When I was quite small I was much happier with my godmother, who lived about a hundred yards up the road, who had a house full of girls, two of her own and two nieces, and I used to spend many, many happy hours there. There was a boot cupboard under the stairs, and piles of *Schoolgirls' Weekly*, which I used to read with great relish.

"Anyway, on one occasion we were playing a game of pinning labels on people, and I lettered a label that said 'Kick Me' and pinned it on the back of my mother, but I put the pin in a bit too hard, and it punctured her. Her fury was such that I ran into the wood next to the house, and I had to be lured out by one of the girls because I was so frightened. When she got angry, she got so angry."

One of the themes of *The Death of Grass* is of a younger brother returning to usurp his older brother's place, and it recurs in many of the stories. Sam Youd, however, is an only child.

"I was an only child on my father's side of the family. It was an extraordinary business really, it illustrates the accidentalness of human life. My father was a regular army man, and he was in the garrison artillery in Southern Ireland in what was then known as Queenstown, now called Cobh (pronounced Cove), and he there met my mother – and when the *Titanic* sailed from Southampton she put in at Queenstown and he was there and saw her; he remembered they were playing music and it was *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, and that takes jazz back a lot further than you'd commonly think, doesn't it?

"Anyway, he went to India about 1912, I think, and he didn't come back till 1919. They somehow maintained a correspondence over those years, and they got back together and married. And they would have had a child two years before me – they had a name for him, they were going to call him James (I was told all this, and I find this echoing in my books) – but, my mother said, it was a difficult birth, and the consultant had said to the students around him as she was going under, 'at one time we used to ask the father whether or not he wanted the child saved or the mother: now, we save the mother.' And so James was stillborn, and I came along two years later, and I think I probably always felt a little bit of an interloper; I shouldn't have been there; if James had been born they never would have had another child."

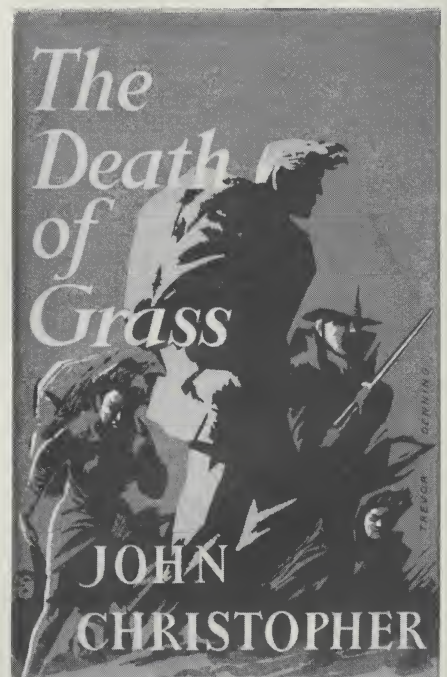
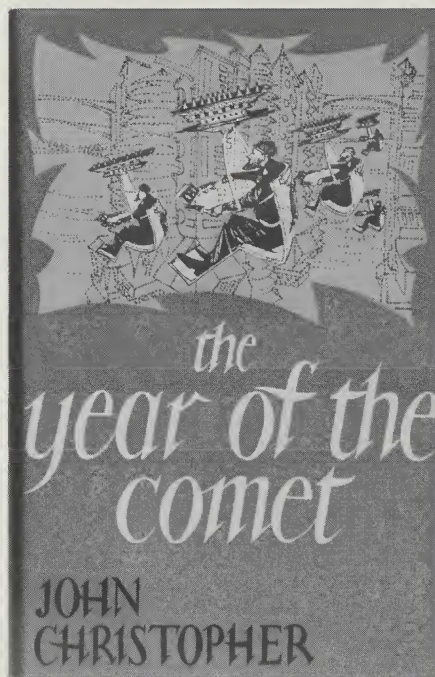
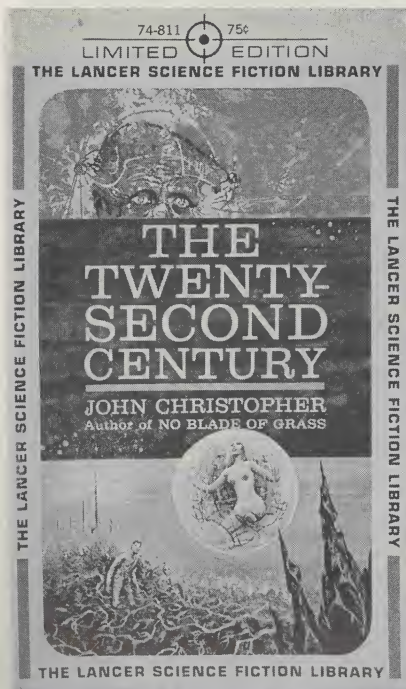
The recurrence of this theme is, however, not intentional.

"I was aware all the time that I wouldn't have been here if my elder brother had survived. Looking back, realistically. But that's analysis, not motivation. I don't think any writer goes into things saying, 'I'm going to put that record straight' or whatever. It's totally unconscious.

"My mother had a very, very hard life. While she was alive, we knew that she had been married before, because a step-child, a son, used to appear on the scene and both my father and I thought that was her only previous marriage. After she died, one of her side of the family told us that in fact she had been married three times, and widowed three times. The first time, she must have been about seventeen, her husband died of typhoid in the Boer War. I don't know who number two was. Number three died about 1910.

"In those days there was no widow's pension, there was no anything. My mother was sent into service at the age of fourteen, which was not uncommon, but she was also very bright, very skilled, and she worked her way up till eventually in the years before she and my father married she had the post of cook/housekeeper in really big families like the Rathdonells.

"From there, she went to another titled family, again as cook/housekeeper. 'One day,' she once told me, 'I met her ladyship on the stairs, and she said to me, "Johnson, one of the servants, said, 'Good Morning,' to me. What should I have said to her?"' And my mother said, 'I don't know what you should have said, but the Countess Rathdonnell would have said "Good



Morning" first,' absolutely humiliating the poor woman.

"I realized later on, after assimilating it from my mother's point of view, that this poor wretched creature was the daughter of a farmer, was in a situation she didn't know about, and was looking to her housekeeper, my mother, to give her help, but my mother had no way of giving her help. She was stepping out of her class, and that was wrong as far as my mother was concerned.

"She and my father, they were both working class Tories; the only people who are totally disinterested in things in my view. The middle and upper class Tories are in it for themselves, the Socialists are in it for themselves, basically – when they get to be rich they say, well, the revolution but not before my time – but the working-class Tory is quite genuinely saying 'I'm not bothered that other people are doing better than I am.' My father was out in India before the war of course, and he used to say, 'we'd had good officers before, but when the war came we got these other people. But,' he'd say, 'I couldn't respect them.' He respected the gentry, as my mother did, it was built-in, and it must have influenced me to some extent."

Social class features strongly in Sam Youd's novels. However, where the stories are almost entirely about middle-class people in middle-class milieus, there is no sense of superiority to working class characters, nor inferiority to the upper classes.

"I used to automatically say that the best thing I'd done was *The Sword Trilogy*. I was never easy with the Sam

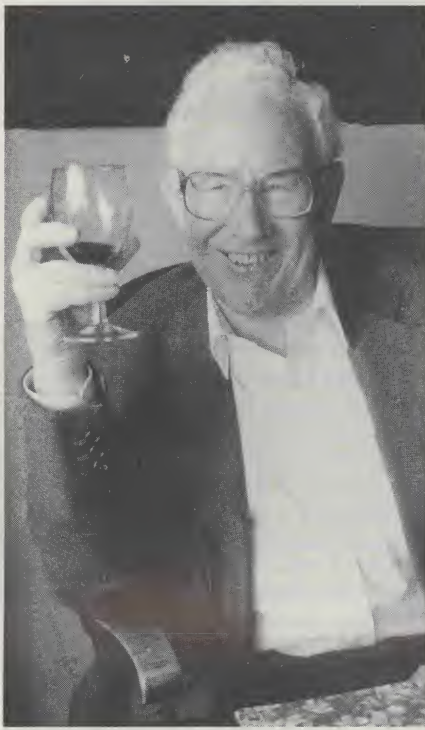


Photo: Paul Brazier

Youd books, I was never easy with the other John Christopher books, they were OK but I was never easy with them, but the *Sword* I thought was the best I'd done. It's a strange sort of universe, but I felt I'd got things right there. Now, reading the Stanley Winchester books again, and finding them strange and unfamiliar, I think probably I'd got it more right there than I did anywhere else.

"For anybody from the working class who moves into a middle class social world, it's very confusing, because the English middle classes are full of subtleties – I suspect that only the Chinese are more subtle. You

have to learn to live with it and to distinguish things, to learn that a word spoken is not the word itself; it's the way the word is spoken that makes the difference.

"I've never aspired to be even in the grade below her, but I've got nearer to Jane Austen in my way of looking at things in the Stanley Winchester books than I did anywhere else. Because they're about people.

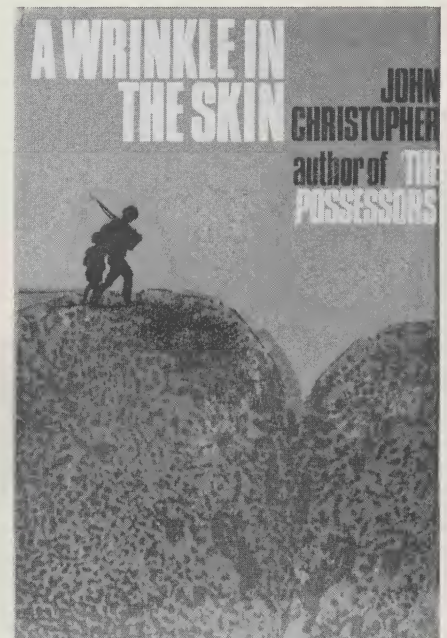
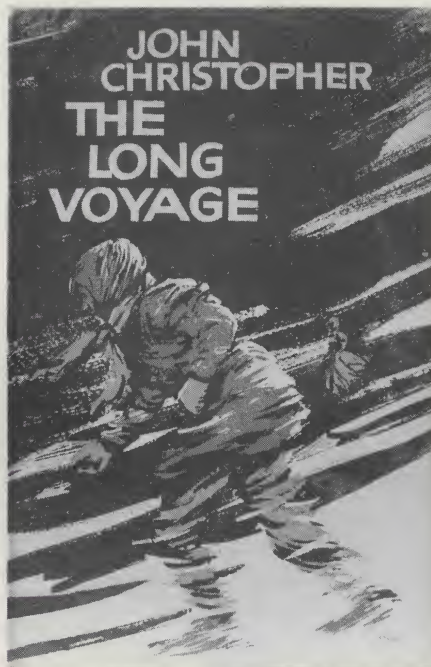
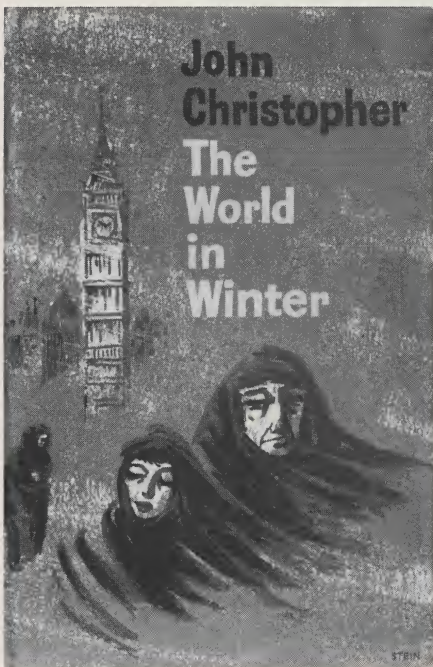
"What I was doing, admittedly with a purely commercial motive to start with, was to say, well, now we can talk about sex. I was talking about sex, but I was really talking about people. And that's the thing it's all about: people."

Sex isn't entirely absent from the other books, of course. It's noticeable in *Cloud on Silver*, for instance. It's just not front stage in the way it is in the Stanley Winchester books.

"By this time I'd sort of split off – I was writing the children's books which were totally sexless, and I suppose I probably went a little bit the other way on the Stanley Winchesters because I thought I can explore this interesting thing. And it's a fascinating aspect of life."

There isn't much sex in the early books of course. *The Winter Swan* (1949) is the story of a woman's life told backwards, from the grave to the cradle. It was, says Sam, a deliberate attempt not to write a first novel that was autobiographical. So it is quite bemusing that the second novel to appear, *Babel Itself* (1951) does appear to be autobiographical.

"I wrote *Babel Itself* based on a group of people I lived with with my first wife just after the war. It was my third novel, though published second.



It's the one I didn't write the first time. But *Babel Itself* was actually the third novel."

The publishing record is clear. *The Winter Swan* (1949), *Babel Itself* (1951), and *Brave Conquest* (1952).

There was no novel published in 1950.

"That's because I got angry with my publisher. I mean, I didn't realize how bloody lucky I was that my agent had found me a publisher at all. The first one he approached was Dennis Dobson, not a good one, but they were publishers, and they published *The Winter Swan*. I'd carefully indicated in my typescript that the reflections of the woman after her death were to be distinguished from the main narratives, but he'd printed it all as the same thing and that angered me. As a concession, he put a little scroll in front of those sections. I didn't think that was enough, so when David sent *Brave Conquest* to Dennis Dobson and he said, 'Yes, I'll publish it,' I said, 'No you bloody won't, I don't like your way of doing things.' And I was punished, because the next couple of years went by and I didn't have a publisher. I then wrote *Babel Itself* and that went to a couple of publishers and eventually went to Cassell. And they then took the other one and they published them in reverse order."

So although *Brave Conquerors* (1952) was the second novel written, it was published third; and *Babel Itself* (1951) was written third, but published second. The fourth was *Crown and Anchor* (1953). Sam had said earlier that the real money came from publication in America – yet these, Sam Youd's first four books, have never appeared there.

"The first one published in America was called *Holly Ash* (1954) over here

and *The Opportunist* (1957) in the States. They cut it quite a bit which was probably quite sensible because in those days I tended to be rather prolix."

This is very hard to believe, but Sam returned to the subject several times.

"I learned. I love Maugham's *The Summing Up* when he talks about when he was a young man and he used to go around finding wonderful strange words and thinking of ways to be more and more fantastic with words. As he got into middle age, what he realized is you've got to cut to the bone, and it's the only way of writing. It's awful to do; it's terrible when you do it; but you feel such a satisfaction when you've done it. You think, oh god, got rid of that lot.

"With *The Little People* (1967), my English publisher was very difficult about this. He said, 'You know you really are much too long-winded in the early parts of it,' so I was terribly pleased when I got an American publisher who took it as it was, without any change at all.

"So I told Hodder and Stoughton, if you feel like this about it I'd rather you didn't publish it, and they said, no, we want to publish it, and I said, no, this is going to creep into the production side, I know it is, you're not going to like this book because you haven't got your way with it, so I'd rather you didn't publish it. And they said, swear, honest to god, we're not going to do anything as far as production is concerned – so it was with a rather wry relish that I read in one of the few reviews it got that – "the author manages to retain a tension through 190 pages of minuscule type." They'd used a smaller than usual type size to cut costs.

"Interestingly enough, *The Little*

People prompted Simon and Schuster in the States, who'd been publishing me there for some years, to take a full-page ad in the *New York Review of Books*. And it had jackets of all the books I had done as John Christopher, and I thought, my god, I've written an *oeuvre*. It didn't last. It was a momentary thing."

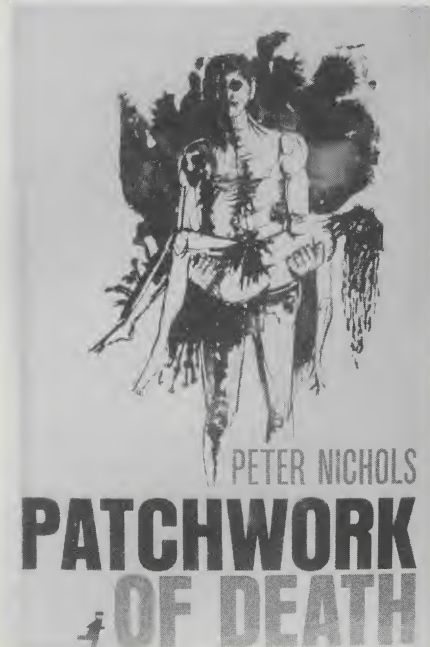
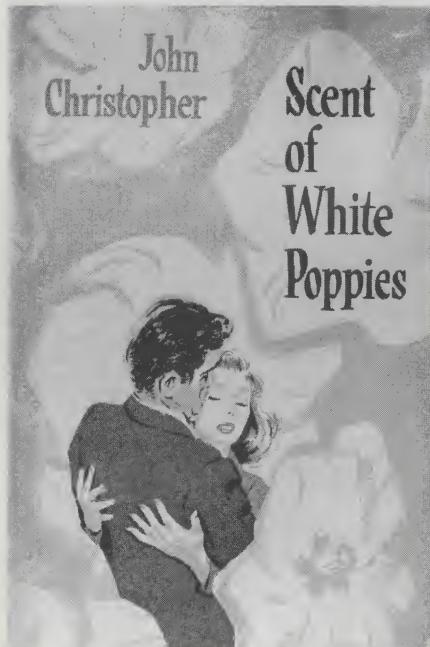
John Christopher's achievement is being recognized now, though. Coincidentally with this interview, a new novel is being serialized, and several of the older John Christopher novels are re-appearing in the United States.

"What's happened, actually, is that there are two ways of making it as a writer. One is to be successful fairly young, and then die – that's a jolly good way of doing it. (Of course you can be successful early and go on living. Look at Arthur Clarke, for god's sake. He's going to go on for ever. With any luck.)

"The other way is this. If you live long enough, someone's going to say, there must be something there because he's been around for so long. I got picked up by *Who's Who* this year. Now, *Debrett*, *People Who Matter* or whatever it is, they picked me up about seven or eight years ago. I'd just got to seventy then, I'd got to the allotted span. I was well past the allotted span when *Who's Who* decided they wanted to feature me. John Brunner died too young. He keeled over with a stroke, so no one's going to say, here's this distinguished old man and that's it."

Brunner, and Keith Roberts too, both seem to have had a reputation for upsetting their publishers

"Well, from what John Burke says about me, you'd think I was the same. I don't think I am, actually, but that's the message you get.



"John Brunner, of course, I employed. We used to meet at the White Horse in the old days, and I was a clerk in the Industrial Diamond Information Bureau – this is de Beers, you know, so it's big money – and, after the war, when I first joined them, we were still getting parcels of food once a month from South Africa; it was something to look forward to. In the early luncheon voucher days we were given four bob a day to go out and have lunch – four bob! I could go to the Bell in High Holborn and have a pint of bitter, and sausages and mash, and have change out of four bob. It was very generous.

[four bob=four shillings, 20p in decimal currency].

"Anyway, I went down to the London Secretary once, and I said, 'Is there any future for me in this firm,' and he said, 'No! No. Not at all.'

"My boss was middle European, of Polish origin, and then a refugee from Germany – it's not generally realized that an awful lot of the Jews in Germany were refugees from the pogroms in the '20s in Poland. His family was one of those that went to Germany and then came to England. And he had a policy of employing refugees, which is understandable. But he needed to have contact with the world in which he operated, so he had two secretaries: one a refugee and the other was English. And his English was awful, it was so mangled, so he had hired me because he needed an interpreter who could put what he said into something like English. It was terribly technical stuff, he'd taken out so many patents on things.

"On one occasion we had a girl called Innes Brasch, again she was of refugee origin, but her family had gone to Australia, so she spoke perfect English. He always had people in his

office to start with to coach them, and she'd been there, and she told me that he said, "I asked Mr Youd in this morning, and I asked him to do something, and he did it right away. I think he must be pro-semitic!"

Sam went on to tell how, when his boss died, no-one really knew how to go about recruiting a replacement. In the end, they asked him (Sam) to write the job description and the advertisement. Once the advertisement had appeared, they then arranged for interviews, and they asked him to sit in on the interviews, and once again, he was happy to oblige. After the interviews were over, they still couldn't decide, and finally, they offered him the job. He ran the Bureau for a year, but it was during that year that *The Death of Grass* was bought as a movie. It was for a while a local legend that he told the Diamond Corporation he could no longer afford to work for them, and instead became briefly a tax exile in Switzerland.

Although he was in the Royal Corps of Signals, worked at de Beers, and features many German phrases in his books, Sam Youd claims to speak "very little" German.

"I'm typically English in that. I just cannot learn other languages."

In *Patchwork of Death*, however, there are quotes from Schiller and he does a very good job of evoking a German schoolboy's life.

"I'm a con man. When I did German at Higher Schools I knew I was going to fail, but one of the things we were studying was *Faust*. There is a crucial scene in *Faust* where Faust speaks to the Devil – *Werd' ich zur Augenblicke klagen / Verweile doch, du bist so schoen / Dann magst du mich in*

Fesseln schlagen / Dann will ich gern zugrunde gehen... – and I quoted that – I think that was the only paper that I got through in Higher Schools."

But the Schiller is altered in *Patchwork of Death*: the narrator tells us that the tense of the verb is changed to turn the quotation into a threat.

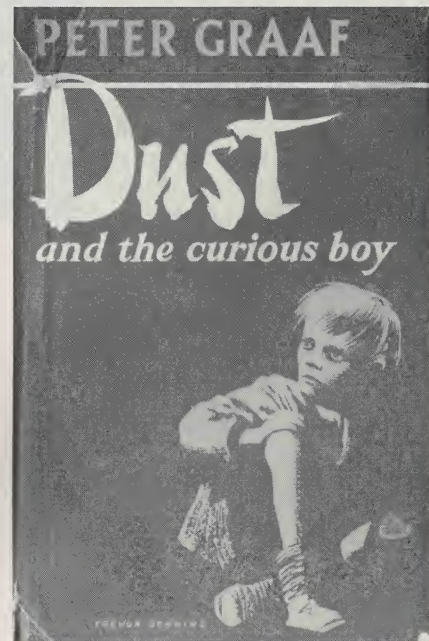
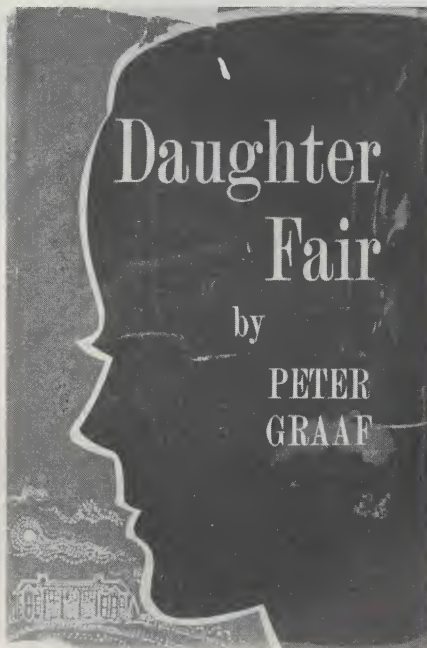
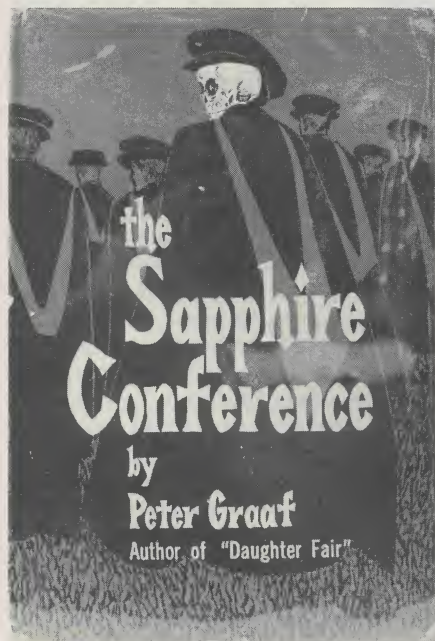
"Really? God, you amaze me. I just didn't know I'd done that."

And, in *Bad Dream*, a English character is so habituated to speaking German that his son expects him to put the verb at the end of the sentence when he speaks English, although he doesn't. This seems to indicate a deep understanding of German.

"Oh, you can understand the German thing without being able to reproduce it. I must say that I like the Germans much more than the French. We're a lot closer to them as people."

"Peter Schwed, my American editor, used to come over and one time he brought his family with him in one of the *Queens* to Cherbourg, and he'd hired a car to drive down to somewhere on the Atlantic coast. And he told me, 'I expected them to get it wrong,' – he'd asked for a large car because he had a family – 'and they gave us a very small car, and we had to pile everything onto the roof rack and drive through Normandy. It was pouring down, and we got into this village and the whole bloody thing collapsed and our luggage was scattered all over this muddy street. I looked at it and I thought, in Ireland they'd be bringing out cups of tea, and in England they'd at least be coming along and expressing sympathy, but these bloody French, they stood there in their doorways sneering at us.'"

In several of the books paintings by very obscure artists are mentioned.



This leads one to believe that, as with languages, Sam's cultural background is equally extraordinary.

"No. It's dodgy. Great expanses of nothing. I probably mugged them up. In a completely different context, I did the same thing in the Stanley Winchester books, particularly *Men With Knives* (the Americans called it *A Man With A Knife*). How did I know as much as I seemed to know about surgery? Well, I mugged it up. And it means nothing to me now. I'm just as amazed as any other reader. You wonder to yourself, 'Is that right?', and I don't know. I'm sure it is fairly right, because I would have mugged it up fairly thoroughly."

Some authors get experts to check that such details are correct.

"The only book I remember having checked was the last Sam Youd, *The Summers at Accorn*; I wasn't sure about the military stuff. David Higham knew a regular army chap who vetted it for me, and the only thing he picked up was that nobody is going to wear uniform out of the regiment, they'd be in mufti straight away. Something I hadn't realized. It's one of those things. Anybody who knows about it, knows about it.

"It's related to the suspension of disbelief. The thing that fascinates me, and I don't know why it is, is we're born with a need to be told lies. It's a great need. Anyone who has had children knows they want to have the same story over and over again and this is what fiction is all about. But you must get the details right, or the suspension of disbelief is lost."

One of the astonishing but convincing details in many of the books is the amount of alcohol the characters get through. It's quite evident that it's the way Sam Youd lives. [*I was having trouble guiding the interview given the amount of alcohol consumed while we were talking - PB.*]

"It's the way I live, yes, I do drink alcohol, and quite a bit of alcohol, though only wine, but I've never smoked, and there's an awful lot of smoking in my books too. If you care to look at the movies of the thirties, this is what the pattern of behaviour was. I was really following that. Those were the days when people did this sort of thing."

Games feature quite strongly in the stories too. There are, of course, the two cricketing novels, *Malleston at Melbourne* (1956) and *The Friendly Game* (1957), but, in *The Possessors* (1965), the characters play dice to decide who will do things.

"Oh God [*laughs uproariously, and swaps grimaces with Jessica*]. You've never come across liar dice? Or poker

dice? It's obsessional when you get going onto it. And it's one of the most character-revealing things I know.

"Poker dice uses five dice that have ten, jack, queen, king, ace and a joker on their faces. We used to play in my club in Guernsey, the United Club, a game commonly known as BTYB – *Beat That You Bastard*. This is simple poker dice; you throw them open then the next person takes the dice. He can choose which, if any, dice he wants to keep, then throws the others, to try to produce a better result. If he doesn't, he's down, if he does, he passes it on, and that's what poker dice is about.

"But liar dice is much more intricate, much more psychological, much more interesting, because in liar dice you throw the dice under a leather pot, look at them, and tell the person on your left what you're passing to them. They have either got to refuse it, or accept it. If they refuse it, and it's not true, you're down – there's three lives to start with, and you've lost a life – matchsticks in the middle of the table is what it's about – or, if they accept it, they've got to improve on it before they pass it on.

"Now, this can get absolutely ridiculous. I have heard stories of the pot going round on a green baize table twice with nothing under the pot because somebody had taken the dice out. This is the sort of thing that can happen. One of the things I found fascinating about Jessica was that I so often found myself sitting, unfortunately, on her left and having to take this stuff from her. And I used to get angry at times, because whenever I challenged it she'd got what she'd said. She threw very well. It's ridiculous, of course, people don't throw very well, but you can give the impression of throwing very well to the point where the person on your left gets terrorized and accepts whatever rubbish it is, and then is stuck with passing it on. We used to go on until five o'clock in the morning with this. It's very addictive.

"But the interesting thing about liar dice is what it tells you about the character of the person concerned. Now, I once knew a couple of surgeons, let's call them Pat and Mike. Faced with a gastrectomy, Pat would say, 'tell my wife I'll be home in three-quarters of an hour,' and Mike would say, 'tell my wife I won't be back until two o'clock in the morning.'

"Jessica and I were both separately at a party at which Mike was a guest and we were playing liar dice – it was a big party, so instead of just the one pot there were two pots going round, and twice in the same evening both pots wound up with Mike because he couldn't make up his mind what to call. And I thought, when you arrive

on the operating table and he can't decide what to do, where are you? You're in deep trouble. As I say, liar dice tells you a lot about people."

In *The Possessors*, there is a lot of discussion of the statistical likelihood of what's available, so Sam Youd appears to understand gambling, even if he doesn't gamble.

"I don't think I do, actually. I'm certainly not a gambler. We go in for the lottery because Jessica is a bit of a gambler and I feel I must go along with her while she's doing this idiot thing. She has her own set of numbers, and I've come up with my own compromise – I've memorized two numbers, 25 and 28, and then I scatter the rest of them. So if at any stage she should have a moment of sense, and say, I'm giving this up, I can forget about it and I will not be haunted by remembering my numbers and the fear that some day I might see them blazoned as having won a huge amount of money.

"But I don't go for gambling because writing is a gamble. A total gamble. My life is a gamble. I used to go to this club and play snooker. I liked to get into the club at about half past four in the afternoon. Now, I'd set myself to doing ten pages a day, and I'd do about three pages in the morning, and I'd bang through the seven pages in the afternoon because I knew I couldn't go out and play snooker until I'd done the ten pages. I'm a lousy snooker player. But I do enjoy it."

In *Patchwork of Death*, one character is given a lead of five blacks...

"That's a bit high, isn't it?"

...but then by luck he pots the first red and gets on the puce and then he pots the orange. Puce and orange are not usual colours in the game of snooker.

"In the United Club, it was an extension. You spot the orange between the green and the blue, and you spot the puce between the blue and the black. I don't know if it's still going on in the Channel Islands, but it was when I was there. The orange scores eight and the puce scores ten. They're probably still playing. One of our members who was a bookie was down to lose an awful lot on a big bet, but, thank god, the horse lost, so as a little reparation to the club, he presented us with a new puce and orange.

"By this time, of course, I was thoroughly middle-class. I was a writer, children went to private schools, all that sort of stuff, and I used to sit in this club with these people, and look at them and think, none of you is ever going to face the central fact of a writer's life, that you can spend a year doing something and then nobody wants it. They were lawyers, they were medicals, they were dentists,

and they were reaping the rewards of having worked hard when they were young; people would bring problems to them which they would solve with various degrees of expertise – and they were paid and paid quite well for solving them. What they didn't have to do was to invent a problem, solve the problem, and then persuade somebody that the invention and the solution were worth the while. It wasn't easy. Every writer has got to try to do it. J.K. Rowling got terribly lucky, but she was doing this sort of thing, she was having a go."

John Christopher is often listed in the top five British science fiction writers with John Wyndham. However, a case can be made that he moved away from sf early on, and that he belongs much more in the top rank of the adventure writers of the day, people like Hammond Innes and Alistair Maclean.

"John Wyndham never liked being called a science fiction writer either. We formed a sort of two-man objection to the whole thing. Because, he said, it's totally ridiculous to categorize things in this way. And of course the categories are now breaking down. Look at Charles Stross's story, 'A Colder War' in *Spectrum* – I couldn't believe that he could do it. It's sort of Robert Heinlein meets H.P. Lovecraft. It's an alternative world – and that itself is astonishing, how much it has developed. I grew up in the thirties and the science fiction of those days – I've said this before but it can be said again – was all based on projection from fact. John Campbell did an editorial in *Astounding* that made a great impression on me, he called it *Extrapolation and Error*, in which he said you can extrapolate from known facts, but you can't change known facts. Known facts are known facts.

"In the thirties we felt we were on the far frontier. There was the possibility that there was life in the rest of the solar system. All you needed to do was get there – which you did by rockets. That's what we thought. There were other things as well, things like time travel, but they were marginal. Basically it was all about interplanetary flight and what we might find. As I've said before, it was as though there was a kind of fiction in the Elizabethan period which fixed itself on life beyond the great ocean. What might be there? There might be all sorts of

things – tobacco? avocados? What you couldn't do was what Pliny did, and have people with heads under their arms. That was ridiculous. And we were pinned to that.

"After the war, one of my earliest science fiction short stories was about a carboniferous-era Venus. I think Brian Aldiss did a collection, *Farewell, Fantastic Venus*. We thought of Venus as being in the carboniferous era – same sort of planet as ours, but an earlier period. And it wasn't like that. It turned out that Venus was totally hostile, and that as far as anyone could see there was no prospect of any kind of life in the solar system.

"And it was life that we were interested in, the various forms of life.



Photo: Paul Brazier

Look at those wonderful Stanley Weinbaum stories – *The Martian Odyssey* – I haven't read it for years, but I still think I would take to it, because it was about a Mars that was a bit like the Arctic, very cold, with a thin atmosphere, but bearable, and these strange forms of life. We accepted them."

We discussed the more recent spate of novels set on Mars that focused on colonization and terraforming – treating Mars as the next frontier.

"That's replanning Mars to become something different. I'm just not very interested."

But it could be an ideal setting for a

John Christopher story: strand a group in a little Martian enclave somewhere and see what happens to the individuals.

"Well, that's the thing that I'm interested in, of course: what happens between the people. I'd be interested, if you get round to reading the Stanley Winchesters, to see what you feel about them."

The John Christopher prose style is immediately evident in them, but the Stanley Winchester novels are much longer than Sam Youd's other books – about 130-150,000 words each.

"I think that stemmed from the first one, which we decided needed to be a fairly long novel; the others followed suit. You get into the habit of things.

There is a lovely story about a girl at a publisher's drinks party who said to the publisher, 'How long is a novel?' and he said, 'Oh, about 80,000 words,' and she said, 'Oh, goody, goody, I've finished!'

"Children's books, in those days certainly, before people like Philip Pullman and J.K. Rowling, were about 40,000 words, adult novels crept down from 80,000 to 70,000 for technical (i.e. economic) reasons. People were aware of this as a sort of general pressure and you write within what you accept as limitations.

"For instance, short stories: I quite like the short-story limitation, and I did a few of them and they stand up reasonably well, but while I could sell them to *Argosy* it wasn't a very big paying market – and if there wasn't an American market there was no point in writing it. You'd do something else."

This gives the impression that the the Stanley Winchester books were written for the American market.

"But they weren't. I had been writing general novels, as

Samuel Youd, which had 'enjoyed' a precarious hold on the UK market: nothing in the States. With *The Death of Grass*, Scott Meredith got an offer from a paperback-only outfit who said they would consider it if I re-wrote it on their instructions to make it more user-friendly to the sf scene. Scott wrote four single-spaced pages to persuade me to do this, pointing out that I had no US publisher and was not likely to get one. Despite already having a burgeoning family, I told him to get stuffed. Soon after that, Peter Schwed, a commissioning editor at Simon & Schuster, did his annual European sweep and he took a copy of

The Death of Grass back. From New York he cabled acceptance, the only change required being of the title, to *No Blade of Grass*: the UK title reminded him of an out-of-date gardening catalogue.

"Scott Meredith later told me he had previously tried various magazine outlets, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, without success. He went back to the *Saturday Evening Post* with the Simon & Schuster deal, and sold it to them for serialization: they even accepted simultaneous publication, another first. He then pressed on to the film companies, and sold rights for what seemed an impressive figure in 1957.

"At that point I was given fascinating information by an accountant. Tax currently was around 90% on income, but on the preceding year basis I could save the windfall by going abroad. My then wife and I (with 3+ children) decided to take advantage of this by emigrating to the States. We had to make declarations on past history, and she admitted to having once been a member of the Communist Party (who threw her out, halfway through the war). We got provisional acceptance; then the Sputnik was launched. Her application was peremptorily refused.

"This was close to the end of the financial year, and we had to decide whether we accepted it (this made easier by my having astonishingly been promoted to Manager of the Industrial Diamond Information Bureau), or vary the escape. We chose the latter, and went to Switzerland. My wife didn't take to it, and six months later took the family back to the halfway house of Guernsey, while I stayed on in Geneva.

"The accountant had said we must be away a year, but two years was safer. (Incidentally, *Felix Running* [1959], as by Hilary Ford, conspicuously refers). We had every intention of then coming back to England and pocketing our gains; but children put down roots. They were at school in Guernsey, and had made friends. Guernsey in fact had small tax advantages, and quite a bit of nuisance value.

"And *The Death of Grass* did not produce profitable pups. The nest-egg withered on the vine, with John Christopher not doing well and Sam Youd losing Simon & Schuster. I seriously thought of returning to England to find a job which would make up the growing deficit in family (now seven - five children) income.

"At that point I had lunch again with David Higham, and we discussed prospects. The *Lady Chatterley* trial loomed in the recent past, and a new freedom beckoned. I mentioned to David the old story that Americans were only seriously interested in three topics: Lincoln, doctors, and dogs. The first person to write *Lincoln's Doctor's Dog* was bound to scoop the pool.

"So we hatched a project, with a purely local UK reference, of my writing about a medical scene but paying more attention to the sexual life of the practitioners (couldn't work the dogs in). I suggested *The Baked Cicada* as a title, which David sensibly wrote off as half-baked. My alternative, *The Practice*, he liked. We settled on a pen-name, Stanley Winchester (maybe a combination of coarse and refined).

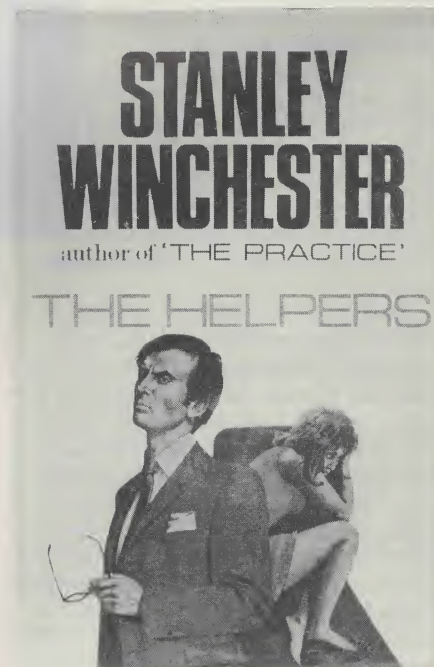
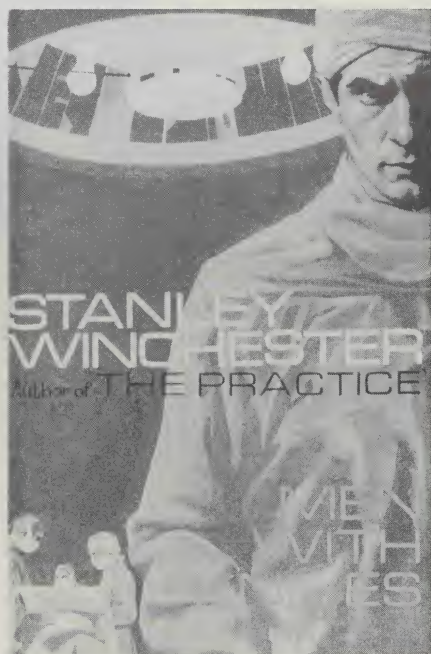
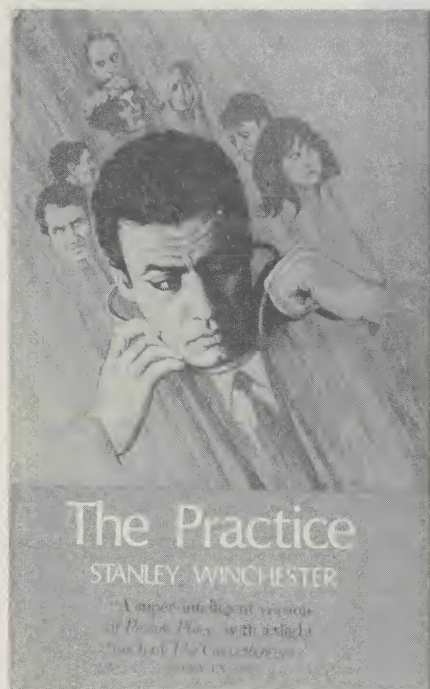
"One thing I did stipulate: no identification. I had four children at school in Guernsey, a fifth at St Paul's, and I could imagine the odd embarrassing

review. It was a wise precaution. The book captured the attention of (in particular) the Literary Editor of the *Sunday Express*, who did a full-page treatment, headlined WHO IS STANLEY WINCHESTER?

"My cover held, just. (Years later, a woman who'd worked at the Scott Meredith agency said that Scott had once confidentially told her: 'Stanley Winchester is John Christopher,' to which she'd replied: 'Who's John Christopher?')

"*The Practice* (1967) was based on general practice. *Men With Knives* (1968) (US: *A Man With A Knife*) was surgical, stemming from the true story of a German surgeon who went mad, killed off dozens of East German officials, crossed to West Berlin, went on killing, and was still killing after they disbarred him. *The Helpers* (1970) was based on an advanced notion of psychotherapy (which Bruce Hunter, my agent who had taken over from his uncle, said he felt really might work). By that time I had tired of medicals. The last Stanley Winchester was *Ten Per Cent Of Your Life* (1973), based on literary agents. I don't think Bruce liked it, and the Americans didn't, either.

"By this time I had moved into the field of children's books, and finances, while not impressive, were less threatening. (On this subject of Channel Islands tax, once on a visit I had a drink with John Brunner. I said I didn't want details, but could he say what proportion of gross he paid? He said: about 15%, but last year we made a loss. I asked how that was possible. He shrugged, and said: ask my accountant. At the time the storm over *The Practice* was at its height, I was told



by the DHA film agent that they had turned down an offer of £100,000 because they had someone else prepared to pay £300,000. I asked my Guernsey accountant if there was anything I needed to do about this. He said: well, pay. Guernsey doesn't go in for loop-holes. I went to see my son who was in Italy and came back two weeks later to be told that the £300,000 bidder was a straw-man, hoping to sell on. Not worth suing him, and meanwhile the other bidder had gone away. I never sold any film rights on the Stanley Winchester books).

"The years went by, and my children grew up and are now middle-aged. The Stanley Winchester sensation faded, as they do, and it never seemed worth while referring to it. What was then sensational is now very much out-of-date. (Some fifteen years ago, someone wanted to adapt *Pendulum* [1968] for television. I pointed out some problems, such as baring a bosom on screen no longer being a shock factor. He said: I've thought about that – maybe we'll have someone defecate on camera. Probably someone has).

"So it had nothing to do with the American market, that was absolutely accidental.

"It's always a question of not reinforcing failure as far as I'm concerned. I've done so many different things – I did the two William Godfrey books and after the second one, *The Friendly Game*, John Arlott gave me lunch at some club of his and he said, 'What do you have in mind,' and I said I thought I'd do cricket from a fictional point of view in three different phases: overseas test cricket; club cricket; and county cricket. And he said, 'Right, I'll



take you round the county cricket circuit next year,' which he had access to, and I thought, that sounds great, but one way and another I didn't do it.

"And also with Hilary Ford. It was the time when the Angry Young Man thing had suddenly become big and I thought I could do something from the point of view of a woman who is unfortunately tied up to an angry young man. I was always having to use different pen names because I was writing four books a year at that time, so I thought, if I can find another name, I can have a shot at this. I didn't really want to pose as a woman, so I chose something a bit epicene. In some places, Hilary is more a man's name

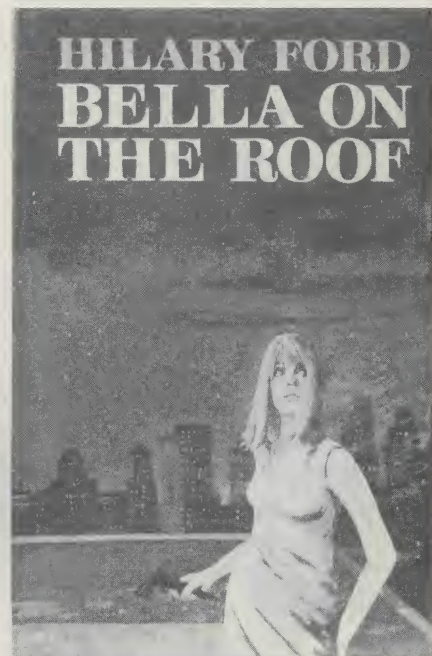
than it is a woman's. So I wrote as Hilary Ford.

"I must say I got some fascinating feedback from that. I got one chap who wrote to me and said he was the mate on an ocean-going vessel, and he said, 'I worship your every fault and failing,' which I thought was bloody marvellous if he'd only read the book. And another one I got from a chap with a very impressive address in SW1 saying he'd like to wine and dine me in what presumably was good cause!

"Again, I did the two *Felix* books and then wound up that pen name. But then I resurrected it for a thriller. This was in the days when you didn't really use female main characters in thrillers and I thought I would have a woman and I thought I'd better shove that under Hilary Ford, and that was *Bella on the Roof*. In fact, all my books with female main characters are shoved under Hilary Ford."

The Hilary Ford name had two further outings. When *The Guardians* won the Christopher Medal, someone commented that John Christopher could only write boy books. So Sam decided to write a book with a girl as a central character to prove him wrong. The result, *A Figure in Grey*, proved difficult to place, but was finally published by World's Work in 1973. It is a typical John Christopher story. While it often feels as if its contradictions cannot be reconciled, as with *The Guardians* before it, it has a final page twist that makes perfect sense of the forgoing story.

The final outing for the Hilary Ford name was with three novels in the mid-1970s, *Sarnia* (1974), *Castle Malindine* (1975) and *A Bride for Bedivere* (1976).



"My agent, it was Bruce by now, and I were always discussing ways in which I could make a little money. That was the important thing. I had a large family and I needed to make money, and he said, 'why don't you have a try at the gothic?' And I said, 'what's the gothic?' because I knew nothing about it. And he said, 'Well, it's a girl in danger and the smell of money.' And I thought well yes I can have a go at that, and I got it wrong.

"And that's why it worked. What I hadn't realized was it all goes back to *Jane Eyre*, and what that is about is not a girl in *danger* and the smell of money, but a girl *humiliated* and the smell of money. There's this need in the psyche of some females to be humiliated. Actually, it also applies to a lot of men. I mean, Ian Fleming's first James Bond book, *Casino Royale*, turned me off completely, because there was this chap who was having his testicles beaten with a carpet beater, and I thought I do not identify with this and I don't want to identify with it. I don't identify with pain at all. But an awful lot of people do. Anyway, the first Hilary Ford gothic did very well."

The fact that there was a market for gothic novels at all came as a surprise to the interviewer.

"It's neo-gothic, actually. The story is that an American publisher used to be pissed off by the fact that his wife never read anything on his list, and he said to her one morning over breakfast, 'Why don't you read the books that I publish?' And she said, 'Whenever you publish a new book, I go back and read *Rebecca*.' And he thought, 'Aha!' Because *Rebecca* is totally gothic, and so what they did was try to recapture first of all *Rebecca* but ulti-

mately *Jane Eyre*, because that was the prototype.

"Anyway, having done this terribly successfully, much beyond what I expected, the American thing went mad. I was then at a difficult stage of being with Scott Meredith. He had developed a sort of an auction, but he liked to spend two weeks of each year in Las Vegas, he was a great tables man, and unfortunately this conflicted with the auction. Anyway, I'd fallen out with him about something else, and I wasn't corresponding with him, and he started bombarding me with cables, and I thought, get stuffed, and I didn't reply. It finally got up to some huge figure for those days, \$20,000 or something, and at that stage I said, yes, well, I suppose so. And I learned later from a visiting American publisher that they had still been in the bidding, but Meredith had had to go to Vegas, so he'd cut the whole thing short. As a result, I got very fed up with it, and I thought well, I didn't want this in the first place, but if you're going to do it, do it properly.

"So what I did was to write the next one my way – my first character was such a bloody wimp, I really quite despised her, so I made my next character much more feisty. The first book had been runner-up for romantic novel of the year award. The second one didn't make anything like that. And the third one, *A Bride for Bedivere*, my opening sentence is, 'I cried the day my father died; but from joy.' That was getting to where I wanted to be.

"Of course I didn't win in the end, because all the subsidiary rights went straight to the publisher. I fairly recently talked to Bruce Hunter, my agent for *The Practice* all those years ago, about the fact that somebody had

unearthed this copy of *The Practice* – 1980!? I mean, the last money I had from this was in the late sixties, early seventies. And Bruce said, 'Well, that's what happened in those days, you know. You'll never get it back.' They licence these things out, they make all sorts of weird payments and so on, you can't win."

An interesting feature of all of Sam Youd's writing is that it is often quite difficult to identify the nature of the mystery at the heart of the stories. A *Scent of White Poppies* could be a ghost story or a thriller to begin with; the nature of the séances (real or fake) in *Babel Itself* is never fully revealed; and, in *The Little People*, it is only towards the end of the book that the real nature of the eponymous characters is revealed. Likewise, at the beginning of *Patchwork of Death*, a man is being addressed from the darkness of a park – it could be a ghost story, it could be a thriller.

"*Patchwork of Death* is rather interesting because I'm never any good at using anybody else's ideas. You get these things, particularly from children, of course, Dear John Christopher, I've got a brilliant idea for doing more of the Tripods, and it's always awful. But, in this case, I'd known this chap in the Army in Gibraltar and then in Italy, and I ran into him again when I was passing through Gatwick. He was on immigration control and trying desperately hard to learn Urdu and found the whole thing very difficult, but we got into correspondence and met a couple of times, and he said, 'I've got this brilliant idea, Sam, for a story about a chap who is sent over by the Germans as a spy and turns over and decides to stay on

SARNIA

Hilary Ford



Castle Malindine

HILARY FORD



Hilary Ford

A BRIDE FOR BEDIVERE



being English...’ and it never worked. I shouldn’t have done it. I was forging my way towards an end that I knew was never going to be right.”

The novel that looks the biggest candidate for someone else’s idea is *Before the Tripods Came*. While it is a prequel, it didn’t appear until nearly twenty years after the original books.

“That was very simple actually. I’d never thought of doing anything else, until *The Tripods* were being done on BBC television, and they did a sort of panel on them, and they had a number of people including Brian Aldiss, and Brian was obviously very contemptuous of the whole thing, and he started off by saying, ‘I don’t, in any case, like this backward looking science fiction.’ Great hauteur. Then he said, ‘this particular thing, how can you take it seriously? They use search-lights. They don’t even have infra-red.’ And I thought about this, and I thought, well of course they don’t have infra-red, because when I was writing them infra-red hadn’t been invented.

“It was in the laboratory, but you didn’t switch your television channel with an infra-red remote. So I looked back to see what I actually did with it, and found I’d put in a passing reference, because even then I was covering my arse, to the fact that it was really totally improbable that these weirdoes with their great lumbering tripods would have been able to overcome the technology of late-20th century humanity. I had suggested that they’d done it by using our weakness, which was television. That, when I thought about it, went back – as do a lot of the things I’ve done – to a short story in a 1930s science fiction magazine about somebody controlling people through radio. So I thought I’d try it from that point of view.”

So the book was written to counter criticism?

“Well, to stuff Brian, I suppose.”

Sam said he was writing four novels a year all through the 1950s; but four novels a year didn’t appear.

“I wasn’t publishing four novels a year because I didn’t get so lucky. I used to sometimes daydream that I’d get six novels out at the same time. There are quite a number of unpublished novels. There was a magazine called *Horizon* run by Cyril Connolly, it was the intellectual magazine of the war years, and it lasted for a few years after. In the late forties, very early fifties, they did a competition, and asked people to submit novellas, and I wrote this thing called, I think, ‘The City’ and sent it in. And nothing happened, I didn’t hear anything, and I finally rang them up and got Cynthia Orwell, who was the deputy editor. She was so sweet, she said, ‘Well,’ she said, ‘you’re on the final list of

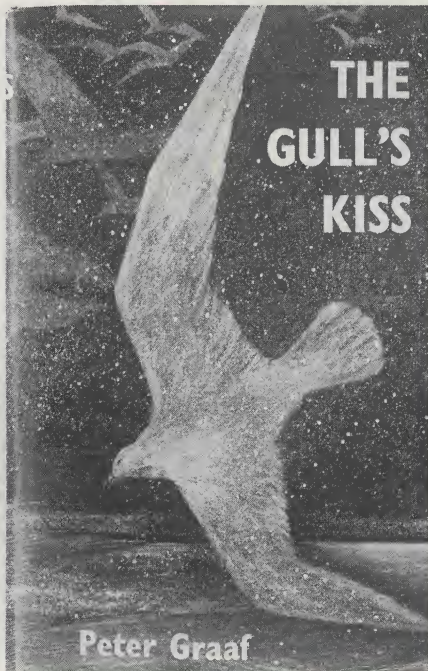
three, and,’ she said, ‘you write like an angel.’ And I thought, oh god, there’s a woman telling me I write like an angel, isn’t it wonderful. And of course I never heard any more. Mary McCarthy won that competition with a novella written in American dialect. Someone asked about this recently, so I went down into the cellar and found it – if you like, you can read it, if you’re so masochistic. There was a chap called Rex Warner who wrote highly symbolic stuff – *The Aerodrome* was one. It’s certainly harking back to Rex Warner and it’s overwritten, it’s pretentious, bloody awful actually.”

[Interviewer expresses disbelief!]

“It is! I mean, what I did was, idiot thing, I had this chap coming to the City from somewhere indeterminate and the City is terribly worked up about the possibility of the cricket matches starting up again. Which was my synonym for War. And I had this proponent of militarism, and I actually called him Square Leg Jaeger, would you believe that, absolutely incredible.”

There isn’t much symbolism in science fiction, but there appears to be some in Sam Youd’s books. In *Babel Itself* there is a pet badger in the house. They take it out into the country to release it and it comes back. This has got to be symbolic of something.

“I don’t think it’s a symbol for anything. I mean, I never had a pet badger, and although it was biographical to the extent that it was based on a place I lived in in Drayton Gardens, there was never any pet badger there. I was just, at that time, interested in badgers, and I thought this would figure, bring this in, I don’t know why I thought that...”



The final scene is of The Cat and The Badger cuddling up together in front of the fire.

“Is it? I’d forgotten that. But the badger to me was, I don’t know what it was, but certainly there was no badger in Drayton Gardens that I know of – but certainly there was that frozen winter, that was certainly true, I lived through that, and you had to draw the blinds, because if you had an electric bar heater and you were found with it on, you were going to go to prison. It was very severe.”

There is something strikingly similar in *The Long Journey*, with a circus bear that is released and comes back.

“Ah, that actually happened. I took my family and a car to Dublin, and when we went back to Guernsey the rest of the family went by air, and I took the car and my son on a boat. It wasn’t Danish, it was a Dutch skipper, but those puerile jokes were directly from him. And there was this circus family, and there was a trapeze artist with a bear, and so on. And they actually did this little trick in Dieppe harbour, when somebody was fishing, of hooking a bit of dead fish onto the line and pulling it up. And that’s it, there’s no symbolism there.”

It has to be noted that there are an awful lot of birds in Sam Youd’s books. From the very first novel, *The Winter Swan* through stories such as “The Island of Bright Birds” and the many different birds mentioned in *Patchwork of Death* to the central grisly image in *The Gull’s Kiss* (as by Peter Graaf), it is hard to believe that there is no deep significance in their appearance.

“On birds, well, I just don’t know. I’ve never, until recently, paid much attention to birds, and know very little about them. But, now you mention it, my most under-rated book was a Peter Graaf called *The Gull’s Kiss*. I used to have this recurring dream, of finding something I’d done stuffed away in a drawer, reading it and thinking ‘It’s not bad!’, and it then proving a success. I put this book away after one rejection on either side of the Atlantic, and did indeed rediscover it some years later.

“Bypassing my agent, I sent it to Gollancz, and it was accepted with enthusiasm by Hilary Rubinstein, Victor’s nephew. I then went to London, saw him, and came clean. He said he didn’t mind, but a couple of weeks later it came back, rejected by VG because ‘it wouldn’t be your main line.’

“I saw no point in arguing, but pointed out that they had already made a cast-off for printing, so there was a thick black line near the right hand margin on every page: could I have £20 for retyping? I got a stern ‘No’ from VG, who that same week got

headlines for giving £5000 to an Arab charity. I re-typed and sent it on its way, and Peter Davies eventually took it. I was sure it would now be crowned with success. It sold around 600 copies; no paperback; no US publication."

This is a great shame. *The Gull's Kiss* is an austere thriller that, rather like *Bella on the Roof*, depicts what happens when civilians get caught up in the edges of professional espionage, and the central image, the gull's kiss of the title, is a telling symbol of what can happen to the unsuspecting.

There is a similar gruesome image at the centre of *Patchwork of Death*; but, getting back to the birds, in the background of the action, there is The Heron in the lake that catches a fish at the point the man is about to be found out, and later on, significantly, The Heron is no longer there. Sam Youd doesn't usually mention something unless it's significant.

"I'd have to read it again, and I don't want to do that. I know it's a puzzle. I think in that one I had a quotation that I came across when I was in Germany once. It was so absolutely revealing about the Germans, that they had actually put it up on the wall. There's this old crane in Africa and he got by by keeping one eye closed: he didn't get involved. He said 'whoever wants to be happy will always keep one eye closed.' And I thought, well that's what the Germans did, all through the 1930s; they believed that the way you get by in life is by not paying too much attention to what's going on around you."

If there is one thing that characterizes all of Sam Youd's books, it is this kind of honesty: brutal, clear-sighted honesty.

"Well, it's nice of you to say so. I hope you're right, and I hope you feel the same way after reading the Stanley Winchesters. I got through the last one, *The Helpers*, this morning, and I thought, god, what an awful mess of people. They are all bloody awful and I thought, how is he going to get some decent response out of this? And I thought, I did! I did! The very last page. It says that there's more to it than that."

There are two passages in *Cloud on Silver* that perhaps sum up Sam Youd's books.

Societies faced with problems throw up Kings and Queens as answers. But there is more than just the offering of a crown; there has to be an acceptance. Thrice did they offer him that kingly crown. After the third rejection, they stabbed him to death in the forum.

(*Cloud on Silver* p170)

Obviously Sweeney is the King in this book, but it's implied in many of them, particularly in *The Death of Grass*.

But more compelling still is this –

She had nursed at a hospital in Glasgow and had seen, in Casualty, far worse examples than this. But there violence and the effects of violence had been contained by the apparatus of society; epitomized in the blue-uniformed figure, patiently waiting with his note book. She felt a new shock of realization that there was nothing like that here. There were only individuals moving through a complex web of their own demands and the demands of others. The balance was precarious, the act of violence showed how precarious, and something of the gulf that lay beneath.

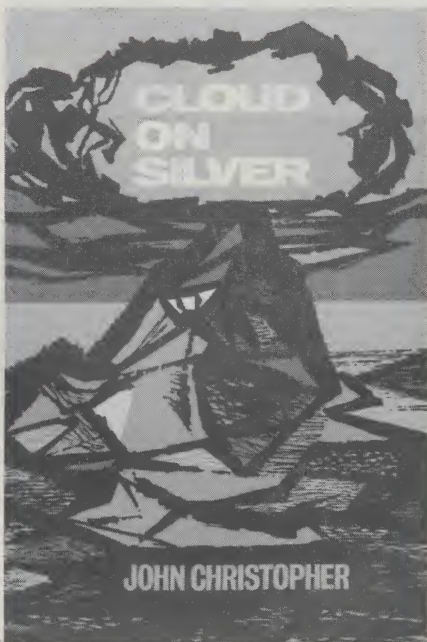
(*Cloud on Silver* p120)

"Yes, I think I believe that."

The books are about people; not science fiction at all. Science fiction is about ideas.

"Yes, you're right there. The interesting thing, of course, is that I came to all this through science fiction. It was the most central thing in my life. From the age of eleven to about sixteen I could have told you who'd written what in any science fiction magazine from 1926 onwards. I was absolutely devoted to it, and this is why I've not read it much in later years. I'm beginning to get back to it now and I can read people like Charles Stross and think, my god how can he get away with it, it's fascinating – but I couldn't read it for a long time because it's like a very intense love affair: if it goes wrong, you can never go back. It's gone completely, because the passion turns against itself. You don't want to know about it, and so I have had a rejection of science fiction since that deep passion."

For many people this kind of deep pas-



sion is reserved for their religious beliefs. And yet, despite an Irish protestant mother and a British public school upbringing, there is precious little evidence of any religious belief throughout Sam Youd's books, apart from the introduction of Christians as a minor sect in the *Sword* trilogy.

"I had a near conversion when I was in my twenties, and went to the Jesuits in Farm Street in Mayfair, and I found that they won't accept you unless you are intellectually convinced of the existence of God. Well, I took the whole course twice, but couldn't be intellectually convinced, so I never became a Roman Catholic.

"Interestingly, a personal tragedy that led directly to Jessica briefly losing her strong faith has convinced me intellectually – the pain and suffering only make sense if there is a God – but I've not done much about it."

At this point we had returned from the pub and Sam had made us all tea. Regrettably, his voice on the tape is nearly inaudible, and his liberal application of alcohol to the unsuspecting interviewer's brain over the previous hours has rendered any memory that remains fragmented. He certainly discussed religion at great length, and had something pungent to say about Blish's *A Case of Conscience*. He told me that *The Tripods* had been optioned for movies several times, and that his agent was proud that he had managed at last to get Disney interested. "However," he said, "I doubt I'll ever live to see the film made."

On this rather downbeat note, the time came to leave. Before I left, Sam showed me his library, with copies of all his books, in both English and foreign language editions, the strangest probably being the Farsi editions – he has been invited to go to Iran, but turned the trip down on medical grounds. Sam Youd/John Christopher has had a remarkable life, with success time after time in each chosen area. However, even though he has published 56 novels, my fingers still itched at the thought of more unpublished and unread in the cellar beneath my feet. But Sam and Jessica had been wonderful hosts, and it seemed invidious to pursue these texts. As I took my leave, Jonathan the seagull was again rapping on the conservatory roof. And, suddenly, I knew how he felt. [12]

My grateful thanks go to Phil Stephenson-Payne, John Whitbourn and Nigel Brown for their assistance in preparing for this interview, to Brian Ameringen for finding so many of the books for me, and to David Pringle, who, via the *fictionmags* list, indirectly facilitated the discovery of the Stanley Winchester pseudonym. Phil's working bibliography, *Christopher Samuel Youd: Master of all Genres* is available from 25a Copgrove Road, Leeds LS8 2SP, England.

An afterword...

In the process of tidying the forgoing interview via e-mail, Sam Youd asked if he might include a commentary. The following message was received just hours before we went to press.

Paul:

I like talking and (as you suggest) drinking the while, but I don't like interviews. Thank you for making this one so relatively painless. But I do apologize for the wine, and for our mean little trick of manacling you, applying that funnel to your gullet, and relentlessly pouring it in.

There's always a feeling of dissatisfaction with what emerges. In your notes, you mentioned *Dom and Va*. We did discuss that book and its annihilation by the Seventies feminists, and I would have preferred the inclusion of that over, say, talk of snooker and liar dice. And you have me ramble incessantly about fiction being *About People*. I should have said about relationships, and gone on to explain why these are the only things in life that matter. But one can't get everything in, and the

interviewer has to be the judge.

And I feel my deep francophile sympathies may have got a little distorted. I can't say any of my best friends are French, but I have huge admiration for them as a nation. My suggestion to Tony Blair that we might best celebrate the new Millennium by re-opening the Hundred Years War was not entirely serious. Whenever I come up with what seems to be a profound thought, I am painfully reminded that Montaigne or de la Rochefoucauld got there first. On a trip to Israel we met a French couple, the husband being so wonderfully chauvinistic that, his wife said, he would not eat in any restaurant whose menu was not in French. As we left the coach, I cried: "Vive la France! Vive l'Entente Cordiale!" The wife roared with laughter, but he didn't. I would prefer them to retain their peculiarity even at the sad expense of our not joining the European experiment. (Interviewed in Spain by *El Correo*, I was asked what I thought of the future of Europe. I said language was the crucial issue. The eventual common language might be German, English, possibly Spanish.

The one thing certain was that if it wasn't French, the French would have no part of it). They are an excellent people. If only they could produce a decent wine... Or learn to cook.

But an advantage here is that by my being presented as anti-French, the fangs may be drawn of readers of *Bad Dream* who suspect me of being anti-German. Not at all so. I share the hopes of all those (including at the moment most Germans) that their present pacific mode will continue – that they have finally renounced their lemming-like Drangs, nach Osten or Westen. But those of my generation are conditioned to a wait-and-see policy in that respect.

Finally, I am staggered by the observation in your endpiece: "success time after time." That's not the way it looks from where I sit. A hint of success from time to time, but always illusory. Fair enough. As Louis Armstrong said to the Pope, when asked if he and his wife had enjoyed the blessing of children: "No, your Holiness, but we had a lot of fun trying."

Best

Sam Youd

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Sam Youd/John Christopher – A Chronological Bibliography

Sam Youd's various pseudonyms are abbreviated as below:

AR = Anthony Rye	PN = Peter Nichols
CY = Christopher Youd	SW = Stanley Winchester
JC = John Christopher	SY = Samuel Youd
HF = Hilary Ford	WG = William Godfrey
PG = Peter Graaf	

All publishing details refer to UK editions
(Where US details differ from the UK they are given in parentheses)

- 1949 CY **The Winter Swan** London, Dobson
- 1951 SY **Babel Itself** London, Cassell
- 1952 SY **Brave Conquerors** London, Cassell
- 1953 SY **Crown and Anchor** London, Cassell
- 1954 JC **The 22nd Century** London, Grayson
(1962 New York, Lancer)
- 1954 SY **A Palace of Strangers** London, Cassell
- 1954 SY **Holly Ash** London, Cassell
(1957 as **The Opportunist** New York, Harper)
- 1955 JC **The Year of the Comet** London, Joseph
(1959 as **Planet in Peril** New York, Avon)
- 1956 JC **The Death of Grass** London, Joseph (1957 as
No Blade of Grass New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1956 AR **Giant's Arrow** London, Gollancz
(1960 as by SY New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1956 WG **Malleson at Melbourne** London, Museum Press
- 1957 WG **The Friendly Game** London, Joseph
- 1957 PG **Dust and the Curious Boy** London, Joseph
(1957 as **Give the Devil His Due** New York, Mill)
- 1958 JC **The Caves of Night** London, Eyre and Spottiswoode
(New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1958 PG **Daughter Fair** London, Joseph (New York, Washburn)
- 1958 HF **Felix Walking** London, Eyre and Spottiswoode
(New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1959 JC **A Scent of White Poppies**
London, Eyre and Spottiswoode
(New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1959 PG **Sapphire Conference** London, Joseph
(New York, Washburn)
- 1959 HF **Felix Running** London, Eyre and Spottiswoode
- 1960 JC **The Long Voyage** London, Eyre and Spottiswoode (1961
as **The White Voyage** New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1962 JC **The World in Winter** London, Eyre and Spottiswoode
(as **The Long Winter** New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1962 SY **Messages of Love** London, Longman
(1961 New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1962 PG **The Gull's Kiss** London, Davies
- 1963 SY **The Summers at Accorn** London, Longman
- 1964 JC **Cloud on Silver** London, Hodder and Stoughton
(as **Sweeney's Island** New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1964 SY **The Burning Bird** London, Longman
(1961 as **The Choice** New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1965 JC **The Possessors** London, Hodder and Stoughton
(New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1965 JC **A Wrinkle in the Skin** London, Hodder and Stoughton
(1966 as **The Ragged Edge**
New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1965 HF **Bella on the Roof** London, Longman
- 1967 JC **The Little People** London, Hodder and Stoughton
(New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1967 JC **The White Mountains** [Tripods trilogy 1]
London, Hamish Hamilton (New York, Macmillan)
- 1967 JC **The City of Gold and Lead** [Tripods trilogy 2]
London, Hamish Hamilton (New York, Macmillan)
- 1967 PN **Patchwork of Death** London, Hale
(1965 New York, Holt Reinhart)
- 1967 SW **The Practice** London, WH Allen (New York, Putnam)
- 1968 JC **Pendulum** London, Hodder and Stoughton
(New York, Simon and Schuster)
- 1968 JC **The Pool of Fire** [Tripods trilogy 3]
London, Hamish Hamilton (New York, Macmillan)
- 1968 SW **Men With Knives** London, WH Allen
(as **A Man With A Knife** New York, Putnam)
- 1969 JC **The Lotus Caves** London, Hamish Hamilton
(New York, Macmillan)
- 1970 JC **The Guardians** London, Hamish Hamilton
(New York, Macmillan)
- 1970 JC **The Prince in Waiting** [The Sword of the Spirits 1]
London, Hamish Hamilton (New York, Macmillan)
- 1970 SW **The Helpers** London, WH Allen (New York, Putnam)
- 1971 JC **Beyond the Burning Lands** [The Sword of the Spirits 2]
London, Hamish Hamilton (New York, Macmillan)
- 1972 JC **The Sword of the Spirits** [The Sword of the Spirits 3]
London, Hamish Hamilton (New York, Macmillan)
- 1972 JC **In the Beginning** (EFL reader for adults)
London, Longman
- 1972 JC **Wild Jack** (EFL reader for adults) London, Longman
- 1973 JC **Dom and Va** (revised In the Beginning for children)
London, Hamish Hamilton (New York, Macmillan)
- 1973 HF **A Figure in Grey** Kingswood, Surrey, World's Work
- 1973 SW **Ten Per Cent of Your Life** London, WH Allen
- 1974 JC **Wild Jack** (revised edition for children)
London, Hamish Hamilton (New York, Macmillan)
- 1974 HF **Sarnia** London, Hamish Hamilton
(New York, Doubleday)
- 1975 HF **Castle Malindine** London, Hamish Hamilton
(New York, Harper)
- 1976 HF **A Bride for Bedivere** London, Hamish Hamilton
(1977 New York, Harper)
- 1977 JC **Empty World** London, Hamish Hamilton
(1978 New York, Dutton)
- 1981 JC **Fireball** [Fireball trilogy 1]
London, Gollancz (New York, Dutton)
- 1983 JC **New Found Land** [Fireball trilogy 2]
London, Gollancz (New York, Dutton)
- 1986 JC **Dragon Dance** [Fireball trilogy 1]
London, Viking Kestrel (New York, Dutton)
- 1988 JC **When the Tripods Came**
London, Viking (New York, Dutton)
- 1993 JC **A Dusk of Demons** London, Hamish Hamilton
(1994 New York, Macmillan)
- 2000 JC **Bad Dream** serialized in Spectrum SF magazine

Night was falling. I wouldn't have long to wait before I could rid myself of an irritant. The fierce vermilion of the sunset had faded over the towers of Simeon, leaving them phallic silhouettes against a deep ocean blue.

The room was like the others in the former palace; spacious, the walls of cracked white plaster tastefully draped with cloths of the Malachite weave. A thick, patterned rug lay on the marble floor before the fireplace, and a huge bed, perfectly made, sat in the corner. On the dressing table was a broken Nikon camera. I'd tried to get replacement parts for it days before – but they don't go in for technological sophistication in Simeon.

One thing I had managed to purchase in the medina had been a large glass jar, which now sat on the bedside table, its lid lying beside it. It had been hard punching holes in the rusted top with my blunt penknife.

I sat on the window sill, enjoying the first cool breeze of the evening. I could hear the wind in the eucalyptus trees behind me, in the hotel garden, as well as the occasional cry from one of those bloody peacocks. I took out a cigarette and lit it thoughtfully, sucking the smoke into my lungs.

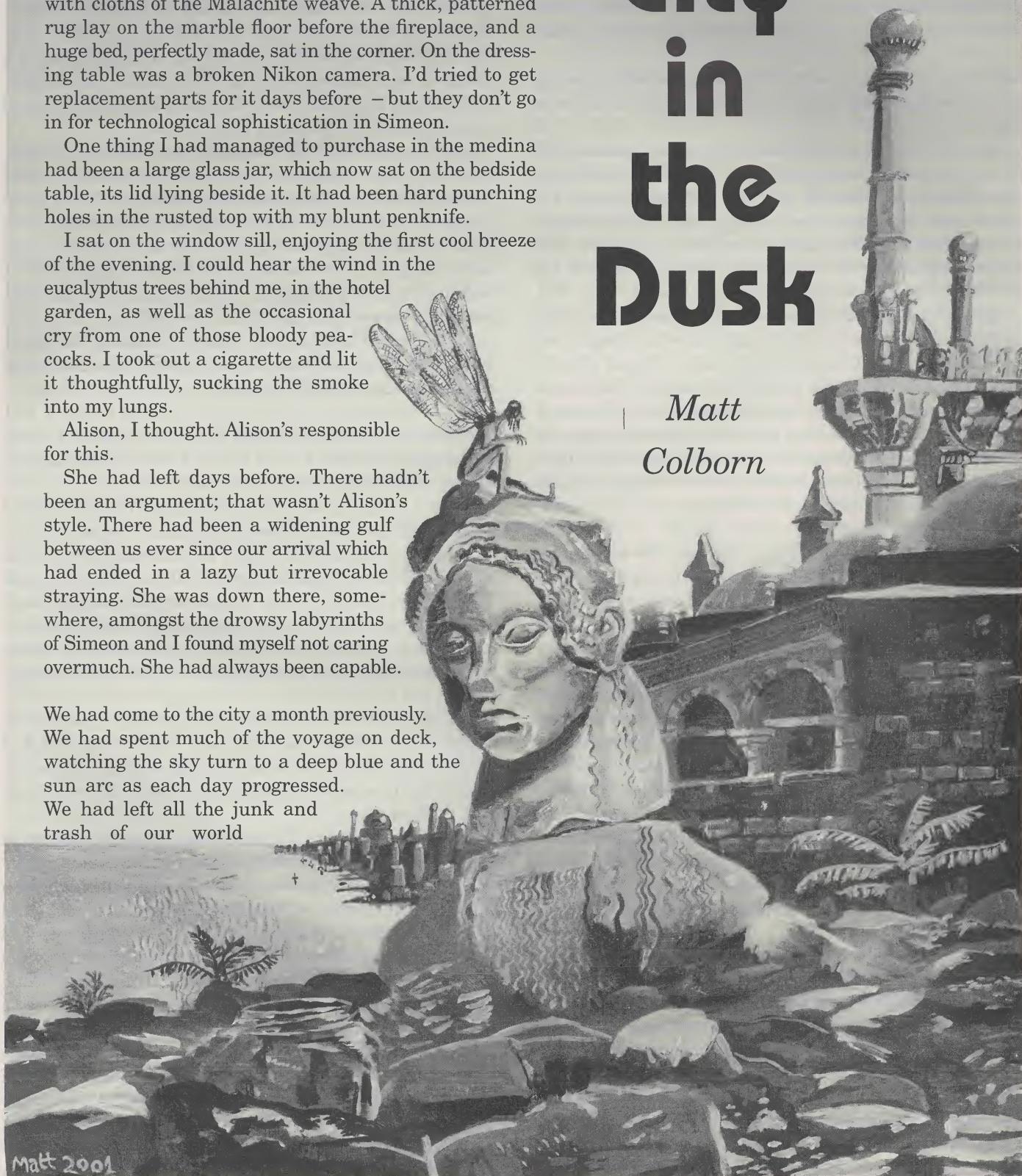
Alison, I thought. Alison's responsible for this.

She had left days before. There hadn't been an argument; that wasn't Alison's style. There had been a widening gulf between us ever since our arrival which had ended in a lazy but irrevocable straying. She was down there, somewhere, amongst the drowsy labyrinths of Simeon and I found myself not caring overmuch. She had always been capable.

We had come to the city a month previously. We had spent much of the voyage on deck, watching the sky turn to a deep blue and the sun arc as each day progressed. We had left all the junk and trash of our world

The City in the Dusk

Matt Colborn



behind. I remember the transfer party the crew had held, an evening crowded with elegant silks, penguin suits, balloons and spitting champagne. I held her hand tight as the rails began to glow and crackle with the St. Elmo's fire that announced the transfer. Moments later, calculated to the second by our hosts, the sun rose on the sea of another plane.

And Alison threw up over the guard rail.

"I've left something behind," she muttered, "I've lost something."

"You certainly have," I joked, patting her back gently and watching the vomit dispersing into the seething wake.

We set to work as soon as we arrived. She was carrying sketchbooks, pencils, chalk and paint. I sported my camera.

I marvelled at her fascination with figures and her skill at setting their movements down. I would watch her in the Medina occasionally, her eye flickering across the scene, one mark capturing a body, another a building, a heavy line a shadow, a shallow one a highlight. Her drawings pulsed with life, immortalizing the beggars, the hawkers, the wandering preachers.

But for me, the inhabitants seemed like shadows flickering on the city walls, hardly discernible in a bright sun.

The real character came from brick, tile and stone. I would wander the back streets, looking for *that* crumbling rampart, or *this* ruined courtyard with the extinct, litter choked fountain. This was where the city was truly alive. The blocky torsos of temples, the sprawling limbs of the slums, the cloacal mystery of the overgrown archways captivated me from the first day.

A week into the trip, the dream arrived. The daintiest of dragonflies crawled across the lens of my eye as it would crawl across the lens of my camera. Focus was perfect. Legs worked and wings glistened. The thing reached the edge of my visual field and was lost.

I hadn't liked the nights from the beginning. Alison and I would spend our evenings in the great square beyond the walls of our hotel, where benches were set out, and meat was cooked at the ends in huge cauldrons. Orange sellers would try to entice with freshly squeezed fruit grown in the irrigated fields outside the city walls; hawkers would thrust baubles at us as we passed; and donkeys and goats wandered through the crowds.

We both avoided the meat on sale and stuck to falafel. I always stayed close to her. I felt watched from the first night, claustrophobic, hemmed in by the sweaty bodies and the rich stench.

Then there was the deep night, when Alison and I would lie side by side, too exhausted by the heat to fuck. She always slept soundly, which had become rare for me. I was plagued by dreams.

"Come and see what I've discovered," Alison said gently one morning, her hand on my shoulder.

I had sat staring into my coffee all that morning. She hadn't interfered. She was used to my black moods. When they took hold, they isolated me, destroying any

intimacy with others.

That morning she led me to the temple of the Moon, where the frescoes were. The frescoes – which are not actually in the temple itself, but in its grounds – were, we discovered, amongst Simeon's great treasures.

They are hidden behind a riotous growth of bougainvillea. The walls on which the frescoes are painted are the remains of some immense tomb of one of the archaic kings of the ancient city-state, which once extended its influence far over the seas, perhaps as far as the awakened lands. The king is displayed in his chariot, bow drawn, the arrow pointing to the enemy. He is flanked by his best soldiers, all named in lists written in Simeon script B in the blank spaces between the depictions. Behind the king is his retinue, an orderly multitude of servants and slaves, asses and camels.

Only a small portion of the enemy lines still exists; much has been lost over the 30 centuries since the wall was painted. The opponents seem to well up from a great darkness. The troops have huge tusks protruding from their mouths, bright red skin and many arms. Some carry daggers, while others hold severed heads. Their war animals are dragons. And above them, fly tiny, naked figures with huge, crystalline wings.

"The Script," announced Alison, scanning the guide book, "says that it was a holy war against the demons of night and the souls of the dead."

I was awake in the dark and I could not move. A terrible weight perched on my chest. I was a bug under a stone, wriggling, powerless to shift.

Then I could move and my hand fled to my breast. I moaned. There was a hideous insect bite there, crowned with a pinprick of blood. I got up and staggered to the drawer where we kept the medical kit. I cleaned my chest of sweat with cotton wool, disinfecting the wound with iodine and dressing it with a big plaster. Then I smeared more insect repellent onto my body, which later on began to run as I continued to sweat in bed. Alison did not stir.

Some days after that, Alison failed to turn up at a rendezvous and I was forced to go and look for her. She had fled beyond the narrow streets of the medina that morning, to the poor quarter, which huddled in the wreckage of a different age.

No one knew how old those blocks were, or who had raised the buildings of which they had been a part. Many of them had been broken up for building materials in Simeon several centuries before. Each whole block, and there were about a hundred and fifty left, was fifteen feet high and twenty-five across. Some even had fragments of what might have been script carved on one side. Scholars had discovered that each block only had part of one glyph. Any attempt to discover what language they were written in had been futile. What was certain was that most of the blocks were now under the sea. My imagination strained to picture the titanic building they must have come from.

Alison, naturally, was more interested in the poor. I sometimes marvelled at her fascination with such squalor.

I searched for her amongst the maze of blocks, ducking under washing lines of barely cleaned rags, past chicken pens and over firewood. Toothless youngsters in tie-dyed, grubby T-shirts laughed at me and some tried to beg money. I tried to avoid anyone's eye and sped on, zig zagging around the stones. At one point, I rounded a corner and almost collided with a large old man with no left foot, who regarded me stonily with his one good eye, the other being clouded by cataracts. He sat on what smelt like a crate of rotting fruit.

I ducked round another corner and finally found Alison. She looked up, distracted, her pencil tip resting on paper. She put the pad under her arm and let herself be led out of the maze. I waded before her, fending off more beggars. The next time she got lost, I didn't bother to go after her.

I had finished my cigarette and the sun had finally sunk. I flicked the butt into the scented dark.

I went over to the drawer and fished out some pro-plus, downing several tablets before getting onto the bed, sitting up against the headboard with an ash tray beside me. The curtains still billowed in the breeze and after a time, despite my resolution, and the pro-plus, I dozed. The bright memories of the days before crept into my mind. I once again saw worn, crumbling blocks of stone, the towers and intricate streets of Simeon. Somewhere, a Muezzin was calling and in the air wheeled two storks like magical kites. I looked about me and the city had been stripped of the moving shadows of people. I dreamed Simeon as it would be in a thousand years. The endless deserts would invade, clogging the streets, a more permanent cover than the scurrying people.

The ash tray clattered to the floor, spilling its contents and jerking me awake. I didn't bother to clear up the mess. But the rush of adrenalin was enough to keep me alert for the next minutes.

There was a fluttering at the window. I lay still in the dark, wide awake and not daring to move. Something hummed stealthily, mosquito-like, in the dark above me. Then the noise stopped and a second later I felt a light touch on my chest.

I half opened my eyes and saw, in the dim light, a diminutive but perfect human figure perched upon my chest, six inches in height. She had grown.

She squatted over me. Dragonfly wings poked out of her shoulder blades at ungainly angles, twitching in anticipation. Minuscule lips brushed eagerly at my breast. I felt pain, sharper than before and there was a little blood.

I had guessed that, once attached to me, the little creature would take several seconds to free her teeth from my skin. But there must have been some kind of soporific venom in her spit, as consciousness began to slip quickly. Time was short, so I grabbed her. In return she bit my hand, hard. The pain and the adrenalin rush brought me to full wakefulness.

Blood flowed down my right hand. I fumbled with my left at the jar, stuffed her in and screwed the lid

in place.

I set it down on the table. The tiny woman squatted, hair tangled, face bloody, her wings crumpled like discarded cellophane. She hugged herself and regarded me with tiny, bright eyes.

I awoke the next day with a start. Golden sunlight was pouring into the room. I looked over at the jar; the little creature was awake, tiny and mantis-like, apparently unharmed by the sun's rays. I suppose I had half believed that she would have vanished in a puff of mist with the dawn.

I peered closer. There was no trace of blood on her face. It was perfect, like one of the miniature faces on the figures they modelled in porcelain and sold in the medina. Her wings, which I had expected to find still crumpled, were smooth, and glittered in the sunlight. There was something very familiar about her.

Gingerly, I lifted the jar and placed it in the cupboard. It was so light that she might not have been in it at all. She was still staring at me when I closed the door.

I sat on my bed for a few moments, unsure what to do next. Then I stood and walked out. I would spend the day in Simeon. I needed the sun on my back and the thoughtless freedom of an eternal high summer.

I went to the ports, braving the odours of oil and fish and guano. The ocean lapped on greened concrete, plastic bottles and coke cans bobbing in the froth of a departing ship. There was a jellyfish hanging in the green water, pulsing just below the surface. I could just see the wire thin, stinging tentacles below the waves. It was a peculiar, protean thing to watch. Maybe I should have had made the effort, got my camera repaired, so that I could have photographed such a sight. Or maybe not.

Later, wandering back up the narrow streets to the hotel, I found myself thinking about Alison. She had caught me looking at her sketch book the evening after I'd fetched her from the poor quarter. She'd snatched it away, hurt at my presumption. Her mouth quivered, as if she was trying to express something. She didn't have to. Her eyes had become as utterly blank as the pages of that sketchbook.

"You're not inspired?" I'd volunteered, knowing that it ran deeper than that.

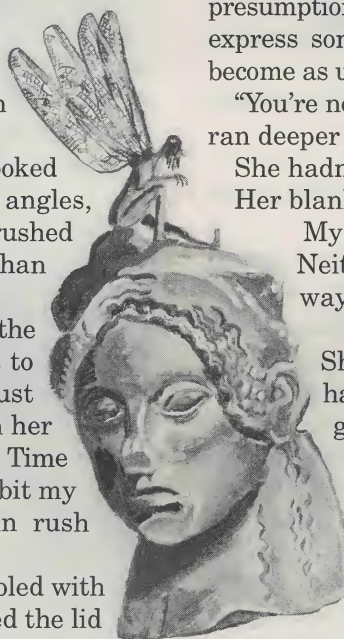
She hadn't replied, just stared out of the window. Her blank sketch book.

My broken, useless camera.

Neither of us could capture the place, not in any way that counted.

She was there at reception when I returned, haggling with the Parsee. The fans spun in the great arched hall in a futile attempt to wave the heat away.

She was thin, painfully so. Her faded green shirt was sodden with sweat under the armpits and across the back – the liquid scars of the small pack she had taken with her when she abandoned the hotel.



She smiled at me when I came in, as if we'd just been together that morning. There were black rings under her eyes and her skin was slightly yellow: a grinning skeleton welcoming me back.

"Oh, John, I'm so glad you're here. He wouldn't let me have the spare key." She gestured at the Parsee, who frowned and muttered at me.

"It's okay," I said to him.

"There's something in the room I need," she said, panting between the words. Perhaps she was malarial.

"Something important," she continued "I just wanted to get it."

"All right" I said, starting to mount the wide, cracked marble stairs. She followed, hand on the banister, walking painfully slowly just behind me.

I prayed that I wouldn't have to talk to her, but she didn't attempt to start a conversation. The wall between us was left safely intact.

As soon as I unlocked the door, all fatigue evaporated from her. She barged past me before I could even cry out, throwing open the door of the cupboard and snatching the jar as if she'd known it was there all along.

She unscrewed it viciously and stuck her hand inside. The thing bit her as she held it: blood ran down her hand, but she ignored this, possessed, opening her mouth wide and stuffing the homunculus into her mouth in one gulp. For a sickening moment, I saw a lump pass under her larynx, and then she belched, loudly, and flopped panting onto the bed. She lay there, gasping, for some moments.

Then she sat up and looked at me. There was something, someone, in her eyes that there hadn't been before.

She smiled, wearily, but jubilantly, and held out her hands to me.

"I'm back, Johnny, I'm back."

I had retreated to the door, shocked and uncomprehending.

"What's the matter?" She frowned.

"You went away," I replied, "You went away and left me."

She stood, weak, a shadow of what she had been, but whole. She hobbled over to the window. The wind was blowing from the east and the scents of cinnamon and ginger floated in from the market. Palm doves cooed on the sill.

"That wasn't me. Not all of me, anyway." She sighed. I didn't reply.

"Come home with me this time, Johnny?"

"I'm sorry, Alison," I said, surprising myself with a sudden resolution. "I can't do it."

"But I can't stay here!" she said, "It didn't want to let all of me in, doesn't want me here, even now! Not the real me."

She sighed at my silence, turning to her bags, which I had packed away in the corner of the room some time before. Seeing that they were in order, she picked up the telephone and called room service.

"I am sailing tomorrow, at dawn. I'm spending the night at a hostel on the quay front." She wrote the number down on a piece of her art paper with a pencil stub. "It's up to you," she finished. "Just remember, I'm not going to risk going to sleep tonight, or at all until I'm back home."

The Porter was at the door. The bags loaded onto a

trolley.

"I'm not losing myself again," she finished, with determination.

"Not even for you." And she closed the door.

I didn't go back to the port until I heard the liner announce its departure early next day. I couldn't sleep for the last hours of the night, so I sat up in bed reading a battered copy of *The Iliad* and smoking cigarettes. The only movement in the room was the fan.

The deep throaty moan came with the morning, and after it stopped, I dressed and walked the mile and a half to the quay. The liner had already made its way out of the harbour, and I thought I saw her on deck, standing with all the other diminutive folk.

And as I watched, I became aware that I was not alone. Beside me was a woman wearing an elegant silk shirt and torn combat trousers. Her boots spoke of many hours tramping the streets and the shirt was smeared yellow from days of dust and sweat. Her hair, maybe carefully styled once, was knotted and tangled and bleached by the sun. Her skin was covered in a fine layer of grime. I decided to take a chance.

"They couldn't stay, could they?" I said.

She looked at me in surprise, then shook her head.

"No." She turned back to the sea. Not everyone could stay. But not everyone had to, or wished to, leave.

About me, two dozen other travellers, mostly grubby and city-worn, stared out to sea. The chosen.

I stayed at the Hotel for a few more days, but funds were running low. The day came when they turfed me and my luggage out. I was happier wandering the streets, anyway.

No one is a native here. We all came from somewhere else, whether that other place is miles or leagues or centuries away.

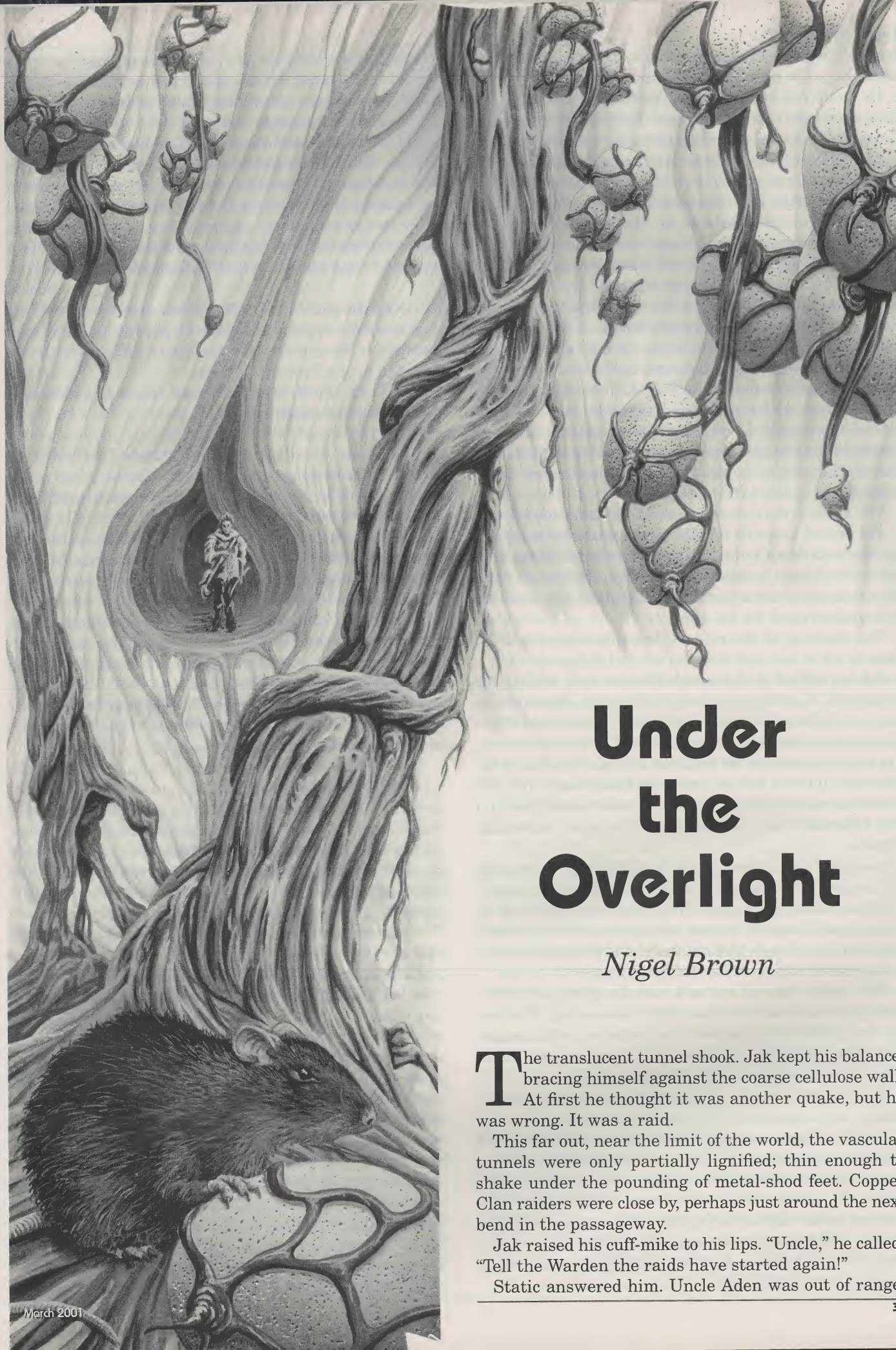
I will never leave the streets of Simeon. The city calls to me too loudly. I do not know how long I will be alive, but I will savour every day that I am permitted to wander its winding streets or sit in the blistering sun with the other beggars. Each day that passes, the hubbub fades a little more, and I feel the stony, dusty reality jump into sharper focus. And maybe when I finally die, my soul will flit through the city's night on dragonfly wings, an eternal ghost amongst the heavy majesty of eternal stone.



Matt Colborn is 27 and lives in Brighton where he is in the process of completing his PhD. This is his first published story and he was pleased to be asked to illustrate it as well. He says, "In early 1993, my father and I were at a PEN writers'

group conference, to see Arthur Miller give a talk. During the meal afterwards, I sat opposite this well-dressed, white-haired man. I asked who he was, and he replied that I probably wouldn't have heard of him, but that he used to write sf under the name John Christopher.

"Not the author of the *The Death of Grass* and *The Tripods*?" I said in excitement. We ended up having a delightful conversation. I'll never forget that meeting, because he was the first "real" sf author I'd ever met!



Under the Overlight

Nigel Brown

The translucent tunnel shook. Jak kept his balance, bracing himself against the coarse cellulose wall. At first he thought it was another quake, but he was wrong. It was a raid.

This far out, near the limit of the world, the vascular tunnels were only partially lignified; thin enough to shake under the pounding of metal-shod feet. Copper Clan raiders were close by, perhaps just around the next bend in the passageway.

Jak raised his cuff-mike to his lips. "Uncle," he called. "Tell the Warden the raids have started again!"

Static answered him. Uncle Aden was out of range,

maybe already with the Warden – the one person who could keep the peace. Jak was on his own.

He could run back towards the Battery Caverns, but they would see him – catch him. The tunnel behind ran for miles, with few side chambers. Nowhere to hide.

The underlight, as always in the lower levels of the periphery, shone up through the semi-opaque floor; it only revealed the faint shadows of the vessels that hung beneath the tunnel he was in. He considered cutting down, to reach them, but there were no cracks in the tough floor fibres where he could break through. And how could he be sure there was air in them?

Once, at the very bottom of the world, his friend Daren had breached the lowest tunnel's floor. Jak had been further up, at a junction of arteries, safe in a ventilating draught. A spray of poisonous gas had erupted from the widening hole, surrounding Daren, burning his lungs, choking him as he scrambled towards Jak. Jak had pulled him to safety, glimpsing blurred patches of white, green, blue through the dazzling bright rupture before the wound's edges had leaked enough hardening fluids to seal it.

The raiders were closer. Soon they would see him.

Jak peered upwards into the gloom above his head and spotted a darker shadow, a split in the lignin fibres that parted to form a hollow in the ceiling – too small for a man to hide in, it was just big enough for a boy, and Jak was underweight for his age.

The clacking of the raiders' footfalls echoed around him.

Jak scrambled at the rough fibrous wall, feeling for handholds. A splinter stabbed into his palm. Ignoring the pain, he grabbed at the hanging fibres and used them like ropes to haul himself up the wall, out of sight, finding easy footholds on the cellulose strands. Squeezing his thin body into the hollow, he wedged his pouch, with the precious battery pod, into a notch in the tunnel roof and lifted his feet clear just as the first raiders came into view.

They had come from the Dark Heartlands, marching far out into the limit of the world to bypass the deeper, more-travelled passages. They probably planned to tramp back through the network of branching vessels and surprise villages like his, under the Battery Caverns – they dared to break the Warden's Peace.

The raiders passed beneath him. He glimpsed staffs, shockguns and nets of vines. Thirty men in all. The last he recognized: the shaved head tattooed with jagged lines, the white cloak patterned the same, rimmed with silver thread – Timon, Chief Ortha's advisor.

They were heading up the tunnel, away from his village.

Had they been successful? Their wheeled cart held field provisions: mushroom fruits, jars of threadjuice – but no stolen battery pods! If the village patrols had beaten them off, surely some of the men would have been injured in the fight. Uncle Aden had warned him the raiders had become more desperate of late; even ate the flesh of those killed in battle rather than leave them to waste on the battlefield.

After a few minutes the tunnel ceased to shake; the rumble of the cart's wheels, the murmur of the men's guttural conversation died away. Jak pulled himself out of the hollow and climbed down.

He continued back along the main artery towards the village. This was meant to be his triumphant return from his first battery hunt. His cousins Cruf and Geg should be waiting for him to stroll with pride into the village store, to ceremoniously deposit his prize into the village coffers to mark his passage to adulthood – but now Jak dreaded what he would find back home.

He tried the radio again. Would his uncle be safe? They had parted company only hours ago; Jak to undertake the rite of the initiation hunt, Aden to meet with the Warden of the Battery Caverns.

"Jak!" the voice was faint and tinny, but welcome. "Have you won your first pod?"

"Yes."

"Well done! Head straight back home. Don't wait for me." Aden's voice grew fainter as Jak descended along the tunnel. "The Warden hasn't arrived yet. I don't know how long I'll be."

"There's been a raid," Jak said. "The nearest Copper Clan to us – Ortha's Clan. One of the raiders was Timon."

Aden was quiet for a moment, then: "Are you certain it was Timon himself?"

"Yes. I saw him when he came to the village – that time when Ortha demanded tribute to stop the raids."

"Get back to the village as quick as you can. I'll tell the Warden. He'll put a stop to this."

Jak continued downwards. His ears popped as the air grew denser. Drawing his tunic closer around himself, he shivered in the cooler air of the lower tunnels.

Outgrowths of fibrous material began to obstruct the passageway. Not the soft pliable epidermis they tore off in strips to use as raw materials for the village factories, but older bark, almost as hard as metal. Deeper in, where his village was, the underlight had gone, replaced by patches of luminous fungi which coated the walls. Jak saw lines scoured through the fungi overhead, where the raiders' staffs had scraped along the top of the tunnel. The pungent smell of bruised fungi made the back of his throat raw; he blinked back tears.

As he approached his village, the tunnel walls became rougher and thickened with lignin. Here was that curious twist in the tunnel, like the inside of a braid, there was that gnarled corner, perhaps made by a collision of debris from a quake.

He turned a corner. The way was blocked completely. He faced solid wood. The tunnel had fractured. It continued, but above, or below or to one side, not here, and he had no way of cutting through the dense sclerenchyma, even if he knew which way to go.

This was why the raiding party had turned back!

He recalled that while he had been creeping amongst the forest of root columns in the Battery Caverns, hunting for his pod, the whole world had lurched beneath his feet. And this was the result – his route home was sealed off.

He couldn't try to find another route around the

obstruction because the quake had rendered his geographical knowledge redundant. It would be quicker to ascend again, cross through the peripheral levels, then reach the village through a major artery from another direction. No doubt that was what the raiders were planning. Yet he could spend ages trying to find his way through the unknown paths above his head.

There was one hope – the Warden. He could give him guidance through the maze at the top of the world.

Aden had mentioned that the Warden lived above the Battery Caverns. His uncle had parted company from Jak at their entrance. It was a good place to start.

Wearily he set off up the slope of the tunnel. The battery pod was beginning to weigh heavily in his pouch, its nodes rubbing against his waist, but he would not leave it. Not after bringing it so far.

As he followed the raiding party, Jak found evidence of their passing. His sandals crunched on the discarded rinds of mushroom fruits. Every now and then he came across an empty threadjuice jar, littering the passageway.

Then another quake hit. Jak heard a distant, deep rumble. The wood groaned and cracked, protesting under an immense strain, and the tunnel floor shook, tilted suddenly downwards, flinging Jak onto his back. He lay there, trembling, waiting for the tunnel to drop further. Eventually the rumbling died. Silence returned to the passageway. He stood up warily, but the tunnel seemed stable.

Jak set off again, but more cautiously, holding on whenever he could until, climbing up inside the network of ever-diminishing tubes, he approached the top levels of the world.

In the deeper regions, out in the periphery, a pearly glow lit up the lower tunnels through their translucent floors. As he climbed, this gave way to the toplight. Now, as Jak strode up a steep incline and turned a corner, a whiter, brighter light blazed into his eyes. As he stumbled forward, dazzled by the sudden glare, he knew he had arrived at the Battery Caverns.

The entrance was an opening that had been widened by previous generations who had carved ornate swirling patterns and jagged lines – the ancient symbol for electricity – around its rim.

Jak stepped inside, the muggy air smothering him in warmth after the cooler drafts in the tunnels, onto a narrow ledge set above the floor of the first cavern. He gazed along it, looking for raiders. He saw the dark clumps of battery pods, each the size of his fist, that hung beneath the bright ceiling; the thick roots of the battery plants plunging from the ceiling down into the floor, that seemed to fill the cavern space with an almost impassable tangle of fibres and woody columns; the waist-high undergrowth that housed the battery rat burrows, with their treasury of fully-charged pods.

He could see where the raiders had passed, where the weaker roots had been forced apart so they could squeeze

through the maze.

Then he spotted the body of a man, sprawled below in a pool of blood.

Jak climbed down quickly, his horror growing, his heart pounding. This was nobody he recognized. He was too old to be a raider; his face and forearms were tanned a rich bronze colour, not bleached with the sallow complexion of one from the Dark Heartlands.

He felt the old man's cheek, clean shaven beneath white bushy eyebrows. The skin was cool. This must be the Warden ...

How had this happened? Jak was devastated – his world was tearing apart. The Warden had always been here, regulating the battery harvest between the Clans, keeping the peace by his threats to withhold supplies.

Only he had the mysterious power to discharge the pods if they left the Caverns without his approval, leaving them unenergized and worthless.

Jak gazed at the slight body with reverence, trying to match it with the all-powerful image he'd held in his head since childhood.

And where was Uncle Aden?

Then he heard a whoosh of air, but twisted around too late. A netvine shot over him; it pinned him to the ground. Figures emerged from the darkness under the ledge.

Timon and two men.

Jak struggled, but the net held him fast to the ground. One of the men raised his sword, holding the point over Jak's head.

"Stop moving!" he shouted. "Stop! Be still!"

Jak lay quiet. They had him. His heart thumped so hard he felt dizzy, but he knew he must stay alert. Look for any opportunity to escape.

Rough hands unwrapped the vine from where it curled around his legs and trunk. He stood up, clumsily.

"He was Mathias. My father," Timon said, looking at the body of the Warden. His voice was thin, like the whistle of air through the world's narrow arterioles.

Up close, Jak could see Timon was hollow-cheeked, his eyes sunken, his limbs like sticks – he looked starved, yet he was close to Chief Orthas; he

should have had the pick of their meagre food supplies.

"I last saw him when I was a boy, your age," Timon continued. His dour face tried to smile, but sank back into a bleak expression. "I celebrate his life!"

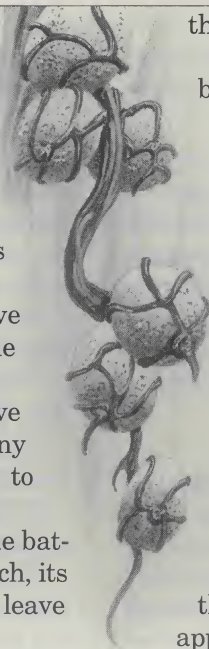
Timon drew a knife from his belt, grabbed a fistful of the old man's hair, and slashed it free with one stroke. Placing the hair in a pouch, he bowed his head for a moment, muttered some words in a strange and guttural language, then turned to one of the men.

"You! Give me your sword!" The man's face was pale. He trembled as he handed Timon the bloody copper blade, hilt first.

"This fool struck my father down. Killed him before I knew of his actions. What would you do, boy?"

Jak shook his head, unable to speak.

"He was doing his duty," Timon mused bitterly. "I can-



not punish him for that." He returned the sword.

"And you," Timon said. "Are you following orders? You are a collector of batteries for your village? A skilled climber of these roots?"

Jak realised that Timon was unaware of the harvesting process; how the rats climbed the roots, gnawed ripe, fully charged pods from the clusters, and took them back to their nests to store them as energy supplements. His Clan harvested them from there, always leaving some for the rats.

Now the Warden was dead, the raiders would take all the batteries, the rats would die, and fresh batteries would become unattainable.

"Yes," Jak replied. "I collect the batteries."

"They send children to do this work?" Timon wondered. "We must learn this, too." He scanned the tangled forest of roots. "I see that makes sense." He pointed to the twisted and crushed roots in front of them – the hole leading into the darkness. "It took hours to force that way open. My men are scouting out this space. Orthas has plans for this region, where food grows so well in the top-light, and power batteries are ripe for the plucking."

Jak felt sickened when he heard Timon's words. The raids had become more frequent – so this was preparation for a full scale invasion of the Battery Clan's territory! He had to warn the village – Uncle Aden and the others. But how?

Timon continued: "I see that children would find it easier to pass through, to squeeze between, to climb above. You can help me, my friend. Don't let me hinder you in your duty! Collect some pods! Teach us!"

Jak could see he had no choice. He pointed at the gap between the roots.

"You first, sir."

Timon laughed. "Oh no! You'll do your work between us."

They entered the tunnel through the roots together. Inside, Jak kept alert for the sound of Timon's other men ahead. There was no sign of them. Away from the cavern wall the root density thinned. The men had made good progress cutting the tunnel out – it disappeared into the quiet gloom. Jak guessed that they had already reached the opposite cavern wall by now. They were probably exploring the further caverns, equally full of roots. And rats.

There was a rustling to the sides. Invisible movements in the undergrowth around them.

Timon and his men ignored them, unaware of the danger.

"Do you climb to the ceiling and cut the pods down?" Timon asked.

"Yes," Jak lied. "I'm looking for a gap in the root system, where I can climb through."

Timon glanced up. "Here," he said. "Here's a space." A clump of battery pods were visible from where he stood. They clustered around the top of the root column, dark globes against the bright glare of the cavern's ceiling. "Typical of you people, to make such an issue of collecting these."

They watched Jak prepare to climb the root. His mind

raced. Touching the rubbery column this low down was safe, but he knew that the insulating outer skin of the root was thinner, then non-existent near the cavern ceiling. Electrocution – death – waited for him at the top.

The surface of the root was rough enough to afford ample handholds. Jak hauled himself up. His pouch, containing his battery pod, knocked against him. It gave him an idea.

He dropped back to the ground.

One of the men lifted his sword menacingly, but Timon placed a restraining hand on his sword arm.

"Haven't you learned your lesson yet?" He turned to Jak. Do your job, collector."

"I will," Jak said. "But here..." he reached into his pouch and pulled out the battery pod.

A flash of delight crossed Timon's stern face. He snatched it from Jak's hand.

"Thank you!" He glanced at the swordsman. "See, violence is not the only answer! You're a quick learner, boy. Up you go, then!"

Jak turned and resumed his slow progress upward. When he was above their heads, he looked back down and said: "That battery you've got. Is it charged?"

Timon examined it, turned it around in his hands, pressed the two nodes which protruded from its ends. They glowed slightly, indicating that the battery was full.

No rat could resist the surge in the local electric field.

Dark shapes darted out from the undergrowth, claws extended. Timon started, then screamed as the battery rats clawed at his legs, scraping weals across the skin, drawing blood, scrabbling to possess the battery. The swordsmen waved their weapons, but the space was too narrow to swing them. They hesitated to stab at the whirling bodies of man and rats.

Then the rats were gone, back into the undergrowth with their prize.

Timon was lying on the ground, a red stain of blood spreading through his cloak. His men stood over him, aghast.

Jak jumped down and sprinted away, back along the tunnel. He heard cries behind him, then the thudding of feet as the men pursued.

There was a rat battery nest near the tunnel entrance. It was his only hope of concealment. He squeezed between the columns and waded into the thick undergrowth. The tangle of fibres slowed him. He tripped and fell onto the brush. There was a deafening screech, then a small body wriggled from underneath his chest. The rat, stunned by the impact, shook its head, baring sharp fangs.

Thwip! A vine whip cracked the air by his face.

"Got yer!" The voice was triumphant.

Jak rolled to one side, then scrambled behind the nearest root column. The cavern floor was softer here, where the root plunged through it to draw nourishment from below.

"Watch out!" The other man cried. "Another one!" His shockgun buzzed. "Got it!"

Jak glanced back. The rat was frozen in death at their feet, its claws still extended. They raised their guns again

and advanced towards him.

Jak had no choice. He squeezed between two columns, trying to conceal himself in the gloom. It was no good. They would be able to pick him off, even if he was out of their reach.

He stepped backwards; stopped when he felt the column. The ground dipped a little, sloping down towards the edge of the root. He was aware of a hissing sound. Another rat nest? Stumbling, he felt the ground give way. The hiss grew louder. It was under his feet. He grabbed at the undergrowth, but it only held his weight for a moment, tearing, ripping, leaving him clutching fistfuls of cellulose. The men fired at him, but missed as he disappeared downwards. The root grazed his back as he slipped down beside it, still falling. The cold rush, the drenching of liquid ... he tasted it – retched the foul stuff out. The light was a dim circle above him, but the strong current pulled him down, under the torrent. He blacked out.

Jak opened his eyes. He was lying on a bunk. He sat up, feeling dazed and weary. Bright light flooded this place, dazzling him. Gradually, he saw he was in a room unlike any other he had seen. It was filled with the glare of the upper tunnels, but the light came from the walls as well as the ceiling. The room was a framework of wood, over which an opaque membrane quivered and shook like a live thing.

Two others were in the room, at the far end.

"Hello, boy." It was Timon.

The shock flushed through Jak, jerking him wide awake. He gasped and stood up, ready to run. Then he saw the other man more clearly: the crimson headband, the drooping moustache, the smiling eyes.

"Uncle Aden!" he exclaimed. He sat back on his bunk, confused. Was Aden caught, or was Timon a prisoner?

His uncle grinned. "We pulled you from the nutrient flow, Jak. Timon knew where you went down. The rest was plumbing. Lucky for you we've got a map."

Aden pointed to a large panel of metal, set against one wall. It displayed patterns of lines and figures, similar to the inscriptions at the entrance to the Battery Caverns. Yet here they flowed across the shiny surface, changing shape as Jak watched them – hairs stood up on the back of his neck.

"This display tells us much of what goes on, Jak. Welcome to the Warden's home."

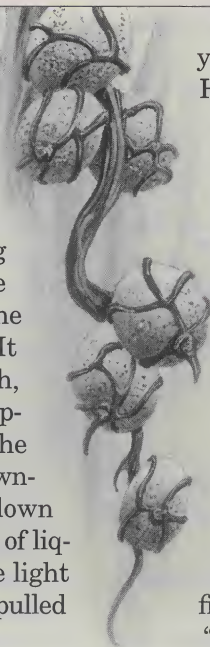
"Where are we?" Jak asked.

Mirectly above one of the Battery Caverns," Aden replied. "Think of it as a bubble set in the roof of the world, the highest place you can go. The Warden can survey his domain from here."

Jak stared at Timon. "What's he doing here?"

His uncle laughed. "This is my older brother, Jak. Another uncle for you."

Timon said: "I did not know who you were until you came here, and Aden told me. I regret that – it would have saved us all a lot of trouble." He glanced down at his bandaged legs.



"The Warden was our father," Aden said. "And your grandfather. His name was Mathias Electa. He was waiting to meet me in the Battery Caverns when he was killed by Timon's man."

"Not my man!" Timon exclaimed. "Ortha's! I understood too late that Father was killed on the Chief's instructions. Orthas has lost patience with the Warden's Peace." His eyes filled with tears. "Didn't he realise the danger from the Copper Clans? They owed him no allegiance. He rationed the battery supply to them by his authority alone."

Aden's expression clouded. "That was his responsibility."

"I accept that!" Timon said. "But you can't expect me to rejoice in my people's suffering." He sighed. "Brother, we'll mourn Mathias later, but more pressing matters must be attended to first."

"Yes, Timon," Aden agreed. He turned to Jak.

"When Timon was a boy, he was sent to live with the nearest Copper Clan to our village. It was Mathias's way of finding out what was going on in the Dark Heartlands."

"I supplied him with plenty of information," Timon said. "My reward was to live under the impassable dark roof of the deepest Heartlands, to eat thin fungi gruel and watch my companions suffer as their batteries ran out, and were replaced with less than their fair share."

"But we're all in danger now," Aden said. "That was the message I got from Father." He turned to Jak. "Mathias summoned both of us. Timon arranged to travel from the Dark as part of a raiding party. He intended to leave them before they reached our village, but the quake altered his plan."

"So why did you want the batteries, then?" Jak asked.

"They are a crucial resource for the people I live with, Jak. Can you imagine what it's like to live in the dark? The cold? The Dark Heartlands have no toplight at all; even the underlight is dim – in places we must feel our way with our staffs, like the blind. I couldn't ignore the opportunity to gather fresh batteries."

"So you're still our enemy!"

Timon looked sad. "Ignorant villagers pampered by the warmth and light of this region think that, boy. I admit I know little myself of the ways of your Battery Clans." He sighed, and for an instant looked very old; Jak saw the family resemblance to the Warden – the same deep eye sockets and bushy eyebrows.

"You're too young to remember, boy," Timon continued. "Time was when our peoples were brothers, as I am to Aden. We traded copper, even tin, gold, iron in those days, which we brought from the deeper Heartlands; we exchanged them for batteries. Metals for energy, and around us wood grew for all, free for the shaping."

"Nothing comes free," Jak said. "The Copper Clans would take all the batteries until there were none left. You should understand that – your father did."

"My loyalty is to the Dark Heartlands, boy. It has not diminished, despite our blood-ties."

Aden placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You've had the hardest task, brother."

"The people I've lived with for so long are called 'cannibals' by some," Timon continued, in a voice almost dropped to a whisper. "I know that! But we live further into the darkness, where the food supplies have begun to fail. Who amongst your people would not do as they have done, when that desperate, that starving?"

Jak was silent, shocked by Timon's words. He had no easy reply.

"The boy's not responsible for the plight of the Dark Heartlands, Timon," Aden admonished. "He's got a lot to learn yet."

Aden helped Jak off the bunk and led him to a wall, lifted a flap in it. A further membrane lay beyond it, but it was transparent.

"Look, Jak, your grandfather could survey this region from his home up here..."

At first, Jak was dazzled by the glare and he could see nothing at all. Like the difference between passing from the lower tunnels into the higher Battery Caverns, this was another step up in brightness.

Aden was patient. He waited until their eyes had adjusted, and Jak could make out some details.

"It's a cavern!" Jak exclaimed. "So bright! So big!" His gaze followed the wooden floor stretched out before them, searching for an opposite wall – it must be very far away.

"No, Jak," Aden said. "What you see is a vast wooden platform – the top surface, the outside, of our world."

Jak tried to make sense of the scene. Failed.

"But those plants..." he pointed to the surface, translucent in patches, mottled with greenery which spread out into the distance.

"Those are the tops of the Battery Caverns – the battery plants seen from the outside."

Closer to, he could see broad leaves, threaded with tendrils which fastened them flat and tight to the ... roof?

"The leaves collect the solar rays and store their energy in the pods further down the stalks, under the roof," Aden explained.

Deep jagged cracks ran away from the translucent areas. They increased in number until they reached the platform's edge, ending in... nothing. Beyond this surface lay tiers of white, green and blue which seemed to go on forever. He'd last seen them when his friend Daren had nearly died.

"But what is this place?" Jak asked.

"We're standing on the roof of the world you've known, Jak. This is where the toplight comes from," said Aden. "Our family knows this, even your father did. Those layers you see past the roof are clouds."

Timon joined them at the window. He continued: "This world we all live in is a vast platform which floats over a sea of gas, boy, amongst those clouds. It's shaped like the top of a giant mushroom, but a hundred miles across. We live inside the edge of it. The Battery Caverns, the regions you're familiar with, lie on the upper side.

"This bubble, the Warden's home we're standing in, is probably only one of many around the rim, near the edge."

Jak's mind spun. "You mean there are other Battery Caverns? Other Wardens?"

"We don't know that," Aden admitted. "We only know our own small regions."

"But why should our place be different to anywhere else along the perimeter?" Timon argued. Jak noticed that his face became animated, slightly flushed. Thoughts of the regions beyond their own interested him deeply; perhaps they relieved Timon's mind from dwelling on his own people's plight.

"What's beyond the platform?" Jak asked him.

"The sea of gas the platform floats on is nothing more than a giant globe, floating itself in a greater emptiness. The ancient name for it is Uranus."

Jak frowned.

"You don't have to worry about that, Jak," Aden said.

"I want you to know, however, that our world was built by men, long ago, for us to all live in – an enormous biological habitat. We don't know where our ancestors came from originally. Perhaps down there," he pointed at the gassy sea, "I doubt that, though." He tapped on the membrane. "We can't breathe the air outside, Jak. It's poison to us.

"The Warden was one of those who have carried this knowledge, preserved it, since the earliest time."

"Look!" Timon cried. A vast crack had appeared near the edge. It linked up with some of the other cracks, ran parallel to the edge, and widened as he watched.

Even at this distance, the ground trembled beneath them again.

Aden ran to the display panel, but Jak stood there with Timon, both of them transfixed by the sight.

As the crack opened, he saw the structure within; a thick layer of wood, then hollows and holes – even at this distance he could see that they were the broken ends of tunnels and caves. Then the segment beyond the crack dropped away, and out of their sight.

The edge of the world was closer now.

"We're rising," Aden said. They turned from the window. The display panel flickered with writing that Jak struggled to follow. He failed, but Timon stared at the figures as they scrolled across.

"I see!" Timon said. "The weight loss – losing that peripheral section has enabled the platform to float higher in the atmosphere."

Aden looked at him, amazed. "Those must have been the quakes... the beginnings of fractures. Father must have seen the danger from up here, wanted to warn us."

Timon turned to Jak. "This is why we were summoned here, boy. To witness this event." He held his hand in front of him. "This is the platform we live in. It takes material from the gas around it to provide us with food and air, but as it does so, it increases in weight. It sinks." He lowered his hand. "Then it gets too deep into the atmosphere." Jak looked puzzled. "The gas which surrounds it," Timon explained. "It must lose its edges periodically to restore equilibrium!" He raised his hand again.

"But that means that part of the world has gone forever!" Jak said.

"That was an empty part," Aden replied. "The far peripheral areas were abandoned when the tunnels crumbled and lost breathable air." He gazed at Timon. "But this hasn't happened before, to my knowledge."

"No," Timon agreed. He pulled at his lip with anxiety. "Do you think this is part of what's happening elsewhere? The failure of my Clan's fungi crops?"

Aden shrugged. "The platform is more dynamic than we ever thought. I must return home at once. The Battery Clans must be alerted to the danger in the periphery." He glanced out at the many cracks that were still visible across the surface of the roof, near its edge. "The outer caverns must be evacuated, their food stores saved. You must stay here, Timon, and monitor the cracking; you can use the radio to warn me of the danger areas."

"No," Timon said. "I cannot stay. My people must be warned to avoid the periphery too, lest they inhabit it and fall to their deaths. Orthas has plans to escape the Dark Heartlands – I must counsel him otherwise. This is no safe region for the Copper Clans to migrate to." He eyed Jak. "Would you help us, boy? I'll understand if you have reservations."

"You want me to stay here, by myself?" Jak asked. The idea excited him, yet he hesitated. "Why should I help

your Clan?"

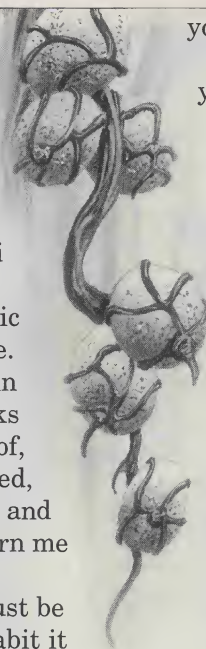
"Because they are people, Jak. No different from you. More desperate to survive, perhaps."

Jak recalled Timon's words as he looked into his uncle's sunken eyes: the darkness, the cold, the failing crops... a deep sympathy stirred within him.

"I'll do it," he agreed.

He looked out of the window at the battery plants that basked under the toplight. Below them were the Battery Caverns, and underneath, miles of tunnels, caves, all he had known before...

Then his eyes lifted – he gazed at the clouds that floated beyond the edge of the world.



Nigel Brown has several appearances in the small press to his credit, and was a contributor to last year's *Fabulous Brighton* anthology. This is his first fiction in *Interzone*; the story was written especially for this issue. He cites John Christopher as a major favourite, up there with Heinlein, Asimov and Clarke, in those hazy golden days when he first discovered sf.



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MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

Sorry to trouble you in your spawning-vat, sire, but our people in the Search for Extra-Xargian Intelligence team report that they've finally decoded the Earth people's message. You'll recall we were puzzled for a long time by the vast stream of representational data broadcast from their orbital transmitters, which seemed to bear no relation to their observable lives planetside. But then our SEXI boffins hit on the idea of running the signals through a real-time semiotic decrypter to filter out all the narrative debris, and this is what we got. Shall I read it? Uh, you'll probably want to remove the mucous plugs from your audio receptor tubules. Ahem:

"We the Earth people hold these truths to be self-evident:

- (i) We can be anything we want to be.
- (ii) Reality is what we make it. All choices are available to us.
- (iii) We really can have it all. There is no contradiction between a dull, fulfilling family life and an active career doing helicopter stunts, plunging off buildings, and beating up on anyone who gets in our way.
- (iv) Our appearance of a planet of pitiful, worthless losers is merely a convenient disguise; in fact we have secret talents inside each one of us waiting to be discovered that will make the whole cosmos worship and adore.
- (v) Death is optional, except for other

people. We are immortal, indestructible, and all-powerful. Limited warranty: This message is a work of fiction and any resemblance to any reality, living or dead, is entirely duplicitous. No liability is accepted for any damage, physical, psychological or social, that may result from careless credence of its precepts. Subject to availability. Not valid outside US and Canada. California residents please add 5% reality tax."

This was the breakthrough we needed: confirmation that their so-called "movies" are a planetwide training program in reality-altering martial disciplines. Clearly this explains a lot of things that were foxing us about the overt content of their transmissions. Take for instance the films of the entity known as M. Night Shyamalan. Our xeno-narratologists were baffled by the way the Earth people still profess to be unable to make up their minds whether the one they call "Night" is a risk-wrangling genius single-handedly reinventing the grammar of cinema, or a dismal bodger who uses laughably portentous cinematic style and twists to camouflage flimsy

ideas, logic you could lose a foot through, and contrived revelations that will surprise only the very easily surprised. Some even profess to be able to turn a blind eye to his complicity in the script of *Stuart Little*, which aroused our suspicions from the start. But *Unbreakable* confirms that what all those teenage Earth boys are doing when they lock themselves in the bathroom for twenty minutes is running their hands under the tap to test for the super-weaknesses that confirm

their hidden powers awaiting the summons to action.

Like *The Sixth Sense* before it, *Unbreakable* craftily appears to be challenging its audience to guess whether its wilful violation of the laws of movie plotting results from bravura or ineptitude. Its conceit, after all, is to take the most banal, threadbare story in terrestrial narrative culture, an ISO9491 superhero-origin story, and dress it up in the garb of grown-up cinema: dark muted palette, slow pacing, wall-to-wall scoring, ageing action stars who yearn to be taken seriously as actors. So we have Bruce Willis very, very slowly coming to terms with his discovery, thanks to some persistent Yodaing by comics buff Samuel Jackson, that he is not in fact a dysfunctional dad in a dead-end career who knowingly blew his one chance for glory, but an invulnerable superhero "put here to protect the rest of us." Eventually he does accept his vocation and dons a cowl and cape to duff up a housebreaker, but the whole process eats up so much screen time that when the real plot makes its long-awaited emergence in the final minutes they're all out of film and have to shunt the resolution off into an aftertitle, resulting in the most remarkable piece of accelerated closure since Bakshi's *Lord of the Rings* banished the entire War of the Ring post-Helm's Deep to a they-all-lived-happily voiceover.

Now, sympathetic viewers claim to see this as a Trademark Twist, and it's true that the misdirection is a bit more effective this time around. Though anyone with the slightest sense of Earthling movie and comics plot form is likely to have seen this one coming a good hour off, most will have dismissed it as making a complete nonsense of a central piece of motivation, and the film's artful flim-flam lies in sustaining the fancy that this in itself is any impediment. It may be unfair to credit the writer/director for all of this, since Willis, in one of his less happy sleep-walk jobs, is plainly still calling a lot of the shots; the protracted, largely pointless iron-pumping scene is probably the silliest set piece he's ever had any production write in for him, and nobody seems to have had the nerve to stand up to him over his increasingly-worrying eyeliner abuse. Regrettably we're unable to report in detail on Jackson's performance, as our viewing panel had to be euthanatized after laughing so hard their visceral sacs extroverted. But it's clear from his hair, walking aids, and wheelchair that he's fresh from masterclassing at the Coarse Actors' Studio, and our best guess at the line in his script that

pushed them over the edge was this one: "I believe that comics are our last link to an ancient way of passing on history. The Egyptians drew on walls..." Evidently it's some kind of test, since we know some Earth audiences have been able to listen to that whole speech without a single outward sign of the convulsive mirth that must be tearing them apart from within. A formidable species, to be sure.

Or take *The Family Man*: an instance of what the Earth people call a "Christmas fable," which means it avails itself of their quaint Saturnalian licence to throw off the harsh shackles of reason and escape into a special kind of infantile fantasy for a brief festive span when everyone's hearts and wits are assumed to have melted into mush, along with any critical faculties. *Family Man* has Christmas angel Don Cheadle give Wall Street hotshot Nicolas Cage a couple of months' guest residence in an alternative wonderful life where he dumped his career rather than his best girl, so that instead of a high-flying single lifestyle of affluence, workahol and casual one-nighters he finds himself selling tires in the suburbs with two kids and a tragic bowling habit. We don't entirely know why Earthlings still haven't learned that they should never, ever walk into a convenience store if they don't want to be involved in a life-changing stickup, or that looking up into a swirling snowstorm invariably brings some



kind of grisly sentimental miracle. But *The Family Man* is a particularly vivid enactment of the glaring contradictions in the broadcast version of what Earthling males are invited to aspire to.

Being a Christmas movie, *The Family Man* is forbidden under Earth law to present familial life as anything but infinitely desirable. After 13 years of marriage and two perfect children, Cage's alter ego is still a model dad and perfect husband married to a

Facing page: Bruce Willis, Robin Wright Penn and Samuel L. Jackson in *Unbreakable*
Above: Tea Leoni in *The Family Man*. Overleaf: Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Sixth Day*.
Below: Makenzie Vega and Nicolas Cage in *The Family Man*





dreamgirl wife who *still* looks like Tea Leoni. The downside isn't actually about family at all, but about the fact that his family life is coupled to a no-prospects job, permanently low levels of perceived affluence, and quite inexplicably cheesy taste in knitwear, home interiors, and leezure pursuits. A film whose development could be kindly described as gently-paced – the slowly descending penny hits every bumper on the way down – *The Family Man* is sufficiently ambivalent about its choices as presented that even Cage's character, granted the miracle of choice to try before he buys, takes a *full two months* to decide that he'd rather be a middle-income paterfamilias than an obscenely rich single. Of course the film has to resolve our anxiety by giving him everything: a new and prospectively fertile life with the lovely Tea, but this time as two mature and successful career high-fliers with a common interest in swanky eats, designer suits, and split-level loft living. (What happens to the dad-in-law with the dodgy ticker, who was the only reason the Other Nic took the tire job, is just one of the countless nagging questions we're assumed to be too Christmassed-up to frame.)

I have to tell you, sire, it's films like this that make me glad I'm not an Earthman. A deeply disturbing portrait of American aspiration, it presents the twin indispensables of wealth and family as absolute either/or choices between which there can be no accommodation – short of the downshifter's fantasy of living the single urban life to your late 30s, amassing all the money you're ever going to, and then dropping it all on the basis of a single airport monologue to heed the call of those pinging ovaries. Good taste is inaccessible without wealth; the film doesn't hide its shuddering distaste for the culture of most of its



audience, including the college-educated suburban middle class whose life choices (non-profit lawyering for good causes; small-family-business entrepreneurship; community involvement and support) it's supposed to be affirming. And all this, of course, is itself a level of living that to most of the filmgoing planet represents an unattainable dream. "Suddenly," says the family man forlornly of the consequences of his choice, "every lingerie ad in the New York Ledger represents a life that you can't have". But for most of the global audience, every movie about the New Jersey suburbs does the same, except that on their version of the menu the option is already greyed out.

What really confirmed the complete schizoid disengagement of the Earth people's dream life from any observable reality was Roger Spottiswoode's *The Sixth Day* – which addresses the question "If science can clone sheep, why can't it solve world hunger, eliminate death, and resurrect Arnold Schwarzenegger's career as a family-affirming action comedy hero?" On the face of it, *The Sixth Day* is a wittily witless near-future action satire about a proprietary technology that allows not only near-instant human cloning but, more fundamentally, instant backups of your brain, "painlessly

transferred via the optic nerve." (That should have been our clue to what these movies were really doing.) When our hero finds himself replaced by a doppelganger who's romancing his wife and smoking his stogies in the apparent belief that he's him, the potential for a satisfying, twist-rich Dickian rug-puller is only averted by a swift descent into chase-movie antics, as the entire stunt-driver nation tries to take him out in a series of ever more ludicrous set pieces. Fortunately the master villain shows a refreshing inability to count higher than 1, so that once the two Arnolds join forces against him he's fatally unable to remember the existence of both at the same time.

As a film about the metaphysical conundrum of identity theft in an age of biocommerce where human data is as manipulable as any other tradable information, *The Sixth Day* has its work cut out reconciling thoughtful dramatization of Parfit's critique of Lockeanism with the need for Arnold to drive a car off a building every 20 minutes pursued by bad guys in earpieces.

(Our xeno people assure us they're the new shades.) "Enough philosophy," he excuses himself when the discussion starts to get just too silly. "Let's get going." And indeed *The Sixth Day* is at its best when it's not pretending to say anything about science, God (just one mention, luckily), or ending hunger by cloning fish (hmmmm), but just making hit-and-miss satirical jokes about the automation of everyday annoyances. ("Thank you for calling 911. If you are under life-threatening attack at this time, say YES now.") We believe it's a ruse to convince us that Earth people are scared silly of the idea of fridges that order your milk. Nevertheless, it affirms their deep-held belief that death is optional and that it would actually be rather cool to populate the universe with backups of yourself. It can hardly be anything but a declaration of war.

So that seems to make our response straightforward enough. Should I sterilize their sector with a local gamma-ray burst? Very good, sire, and may I say it'll be a pleasure not to have to sit through any more of those baseball movies. Now I see your vesicle clusters are already leaking progenitive serum, so do enjoy the rest of your special day. Mighty is Xarg and all tremble before her pullulating throsms.

Nick Lowe

Calling All Angels

Dark Angel: Jessica Alba as Max

JAMES CAMERON'S
DARK ANGEL

ASK TO BE AN EXPERIMENT I DIDN'T ASK TO BE FASTER, OR STRONGER
OR SMARTER THAN THE AVERAGE BEAR I DIDN'T CHOOSE TO BE A FUGITIVE

TELEVISION+AND+MEDIA+COMMENTARY+BY+EVELYN+LEWES

Sank 'evan – for leetle gurrlls,” sang Maurice Chevalier about a million years ago, and it may be that this is becoming the theme tune of the media bosses in Hollywood, because the fantasy-machines are certainly beginning to mass-produce them.

Of course, there have always been female superheroes of one sort or another, but somehow Supergirl doesn't seem to be a patch on Buffy, and how many others were there back in the good old days of the comic book (don't write in and answer – that was a rhetorical question). My point is that it isn't easy to remember many. There is always the exception that proves the rule, but for every Modesty Blaise there were probably a thousand James Bonds. Strange how they were all cartoon girls, but from *Supergirl* through *Wonder Woman* to *Tank Girl* and most recently *Lara Croft*, gorgeous assertive action-women, the sort of woman we really fancied, have been almost entirely confined to the cartoons. Perhaps the real women were too concerned about mussing their hair or getting all sweaty to want to play such a part.

But no more. All of a sudden, feisty, no-nonsense, smart talking, stunningly dressed and drop-dead gorgeous girls are the order of the day in TV drama performed by live actors, so that it is becoming difficult to turn on the TV without encountering them. The softly, softly approach of the three sisters in *Charmed*, Pru, Piper and Phoebe (ppp,

softly softly, geddit) is definitely a throw-back to the whimsicality of *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*. They each have a power, but are more powerful together than separately – yet another manifestation of the famous Hollywood ideal of family solidarity – but, despite the occasional dark and gruesome episode, the programme's saccharine West Coast charm means that its repeats have already been relegated to the comparative obscurity of *The Living Channel*.

To digress for a moment, the recent availability of ever larger numbers of TV channels is becoming its own form of commentary and discrimination, so that the less rich but more focused channels are becoming the destination for any repeats that don't have lasting mass appeal. Thus, as above, *Charmed* has made its way to *The Living Channel*, a sort of television women's magazine, while recent mega-disappointments like *Babylon 5* and, already, *Farscape*, have, surprise, surprise, started appearing regularly on *The Sci-Fi Channel* alongside the other cheap dregs of 30 years of duff sf televisual programming such as *Lost in Space*. Needless to say, *Star Trek* and the other Roddenberry projects have thus far avoided this fate, still appearing on the more prestigious (i.e. richer) channels – one of the BBCs, Channel Four or Sky One (strange that the most populist channel, ITV, never appears to feature any drama from the fantastic genres, no matter how popular it be).

But back to the ladies. Of course,

there have been other action heroines; perhaps the prototype on TV is the black-leather-catsuit-clad Avengeress, Cathy Gale, played by Honor Blackman. Succeeded by Diana Rigg as Emma Peel, Linda Thorson as Tara King, then, in *The New Avengers*, Joanna Lumley as Purdey, this role seems to have retreated from the active to the decorative.

The paragons of '70s chic were *Charlie's Angels*, who managed to have astonishing adventures while never getting their hair mussed. (Interestingly, an internet war has sprung up between the fans of these '70s icons and fans of the girls of *Charmed* over which is better; they might as well argue which is better, cheese or cheese).

Now it is noticeable that for many of these action ladies there is a man, either in the foreground, like John Steed, or in the background, like Charlie, whose role it is both to put them in harm's way and to be there to save them when the going gets too tough. And it is equally noticeable that with the current crop, while there is a man, he is emasculated in some way, and can't come to the rescue – Rupert Giles, Buffy's librarian/watcher is the very epitome of a namby pamby Englishman (although they have been toughening him up of late), while in *Charmed* the girls are simply not allowed to have meaningful men in their lives.

Piper is most attractive and most vulnerable – but anyone who runs a

restaurant called "Quake" in San Francisco is asking for trouble – and most often gets a chap. However, either Phoebe, her more largely endowed sister (not as pretty, but who notices when she always wears such revealing tops) intervenes (I was going to say "horns in" but this is a family channel) and steals the beau, or the beau turns out bad, or gets killed. Standard TV stuff. Elder sister Prue (are the names significant? Do bears get that wonderful comfortable feeling in the woods?) has an ex-boyfriend who is a cop, and wants to get back together with her. She wants him too, but needs to look after her two sisters and anyway she has this dread secret that she just can't share (*why not, for crissakes?*), so she has this terrible inner conflict... you get the drift? This is good, safe, formula television with the single new idea that in the end the lasses are just going to have to cope on their own.

No mention of the 1970s would be complete without Lynda Carter's (is that name for real?) magnificently silly *Wonder Woman*. Combining all the worst excesses of comic book storytelling – Captain-America-type costume with added tiara/mask, magic transformation of ordinary person into superhero, and off-the-shelf villains – with a woman whose figure can best be described as the matronly side of voluptuous could only lead to televisual drama that was decidedly self-parodying and verging on the camp. While the 1960s television *Batman* did this extremely well, there is something fundamentally flawed about the idea of a camp woman, and it is remembered with little affection.

Through the 1980s, I can't bring to mind a single female superhero on TV (again, please don't write in, it spoils the flow of the prose), but as we slither into the 1990s, there seems to be a landmark movie. *Heathers* (1989, Dir. Michael Lehmann) is a teen-angst movie of the first water. A new girl at school, played by Winona Ryder, is recruited by the smart set, who call themselves "Heathers," as that is the name of their prominent members. She has to perform silly tasks and dares in order to be accepted into the sorority. At the same time, she meets a new boy in school, played by Christian Slater, who is plainly the devil incarnate. She is also fascinated by him, and the story told is of her reconciliation of these two temptations against all the other regular things you're supposed to do or not do at school.

If this sounds like a prototype of Buffy, then I'm doing my job right. There is little doubt that what we are getting in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a straightforward high-school drama which concretizes the metaphor of teen angst into actual demons and demon

Charmed: Piper, Prue, and Phoebe pose prettily



lovers. The high-school drama has been done over and over in the movies – *Ten Things I Hate About You* (starring two of the leads from *Third Rock from the Sun*) is a superb recent manifestation among many icky contenders (it being an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* might have had some bearing on its quality), although like most of that ilk it has no fantastic elements, so is outside my remit here.

What is happening is that TV entertainment has discovered it has to feature women in its product, and in doing this it has further discovered it can no longer rely on mere spectacle to please the audience – it needs character too.

If there is one thing that sets apart all these new dramas-that-feature-women from their precursors and rivals, it is this focus on the development of character. Over on the half-hour comedy front, there is of course *Third Rock from the Sun*, still managing huge belly laughs well into its fourth season, but notable here for its wonderful Sally, an alien warrior in a human female body who is learning the hard way all the pitfalls and contradictions of being a woman. Sally must be providing a superb role model for an upcoming generation of girls, alongside encouragement for the less attractive boys of that same generation through her affair with fat and unprepossessing Officer Don.

In among *Seinfeld* and *Frasier* and *Third Rock from the Sun* there is another superbly funny series called *Suddenly Susan*, starring Brooke Shields as Susan. Susan, about to marry conventionally a rich lawyer, flees from the altar. She is then offered a job by her erstwhile fiancé's maverick brother as a

columnist on his alternative magazine, *The Gate* (yes, it's set in San Francisco). Her remit: to write about life from her new point of view. She is being directed towards examining character development, and by jingo, she's good at it. There is a superb cast of the cool, the crazy and the capable around her, and justifying her inclusion here, many of the episodes feature surreal fantasy sequences that illustrate particular facets of developments that are occurring in the main story line. It is outrageous that this fine show has hardly received any terrestrial showing in the UK (Channel 4 have aired only the first series, and that at strange hours). Three series have appeared on Sky One (a fourth, that ties up the whole storyline, is made but thus far unshown in the UK), but Sky mess their schedules about so much it is impossible to catch a whole series of anything – the most recent showing of *Susan* was at 3.30 in the morning, every day of the week: neither my brain nor my video recorder is up to that kind of schedule, and I still haven't seen all episodes. Oh, for a video, or better a DVD release.

On a much more serious level, but still with bundles of laughs, *Ally McBeal* makes a frontal attack on the contradictions of life. Ally is a successful lawyer in her late twenties. The love of her life (since they were little together) left her to go to law school, where he found and married a new woman. Ally went to law school too, went out and made a successful start on a career as a lawyer, and we first encounter her as she has been sacked. She encounters an old acquaintance, John Fish, in the street, who has set up his own law firm. He immediately invites her to join him, and she accepts – only to find that her ex-beau is also a lawyer there. The programme investigates in some detail her late-twenties angst – she wants to get married and have a family, but she also wants to be a successful independent lawyer. These contradictions, along with the bizarre and unreal cases and trials she has to take part in, make up the distressingly contradictory world she inhabits. She compensates by fantasizing, but becomes increasingly worried that her fantasies are becoming more and more concrete. Commentary is in the form of much-loved popular songs sung by the resident singer in the bar below the firm, so that at time the programme begins to look like an American take on Dennis Potter's seminal *The Singing Detective* or *Pennies from Heaven*. What makes *Ally McBeal* such a remarkable success is that, plainly, Ally's fantasies are no more than manifestations of her sweet sentimental inner nature, and that she has nothing to fear except the loneliness she appears to be condemning herself to by being a successful lawyer. The truly bizarre



Christian Slater and Winona Ryder in *Heathers* (1989)

grotesqueries lie entirely in the real world she inhabits. What is noticeable for our purposes here is that, while she is constantly in search of a man, and she is surrounded by men, there is no man in her life, and ultimately she stands alone. What is at once her strength she seems to perceive as her failing, but while her character is definitely growing as she approaches thirty, it is hard not to feel sometimes that she is little more than a vehicle for the show's writer, David E. Kelley, to pitch some extraordinarily savage satire at his country's absurd legal system.

Whether the super powers are those of a slayer, as with *Buffy*, a cartoon character, as with *Wonder Woman*, or of a supercompetent superconfident woman, as with *Ally McBeal* or *Cathy Gale*, every one of these women of wonder has an edge: it's what gives the stories their bite, I suspect, and as propaganda, it can only do good for women's self-image generally, as long as pretty young things with no skills don't actually go out and try to take on street thugs head-to-head. The *Spice Girls'* girl power is here, and it is a wonder to behold.

So, where can all this development of the role of women take us? Well, into the future, of course, but a future, sadly, still shaped by the idiocies of men. *Dark Angel* is the first fiction I can think of that projects this welter of female development and emancipation into the future (look, I asked you not to write in, OK?). It is 2019, and as the result of an EMP in the upper atmosphere, the whole economy of the west coast of America is in chaos. Interestingly set in Seattle rather than California, the world depicted resembles the world of *Blade Runner* to a remarkable degree. Ten years ago, before the EMP, the subjects in a government experiment to breed supersoldiers, Project Manticore, broke out of their base. They look exactly like other human beings, except that they have a barcode tattooed on the back of their necks. They have been subject to search-out-and-kill-with-extreme-prejudice orders ever since, and part of the ongoing story is the efforts of the government to find and eradicate our own *Dark Angel*, Max Guevara.

This is already straining my credibility. If the EMP wiped out all commerce, how come everyone still uses computers (and they're all Apple Macintoshes, using the future Mac OS X – great product placement there)? I'm sure there's a reason, but it hasn't been made plain to me yet. And barcodes. The flexibility of human skin would make a barcode instantly unreadable, but on someone who had done ten years of growing since it was tattooed? It can have no other purpose than as a

Suddenly Susan: Brooke Shields and Eric Idle



stigma. To quote John Cage, *Ally McBeal's* eccentric boss, when addressing juries, "Say it with me: Puhlease!" There is more such, but let's leave it aside – why let continuity or technical incompetence obstruct a good story?

Max Guevara (good symbolic name there, again) is played by Jessica Alba, and is purported to be the hottest thing since the last hot thing. Personally, I can't see it. I never found collagen attractive, and her lips look over-ripe to me. She's a pretty enough little thing, but give me Willow, all natural curves and the prettiest smile, any day. She rides a bicycle as a messenger by day, and a huge motor-cycle (without a helmet!) for fun by night. She has evidently grown up caring for no one, being cared for by no one, and conducts daring cat robberies of the fabulously rich using her supersoldier powers to get the cash to pay for both her motor-cycle and the drug she depends on to suppress her nervous tremors (shades of the Jem-Haddar here, methinks).

Concurrently, there is a fabulously rich freedom fighter who calls himself "Eyes Only" who breaks into regular digital television broadcasts to dish the dirt on corruption and murder in high places, and then tries to do something concrete about what he reveals.

In the pilot episode, Max (shades of Max Headroom, I'm sure) steals from Eyes Only, and he tracks her down and tries to recruit her to his cause. I'm sure you're all gagging to watch this already, so I won't reveal what happens except that the lead male role, Eyes Only, gets



Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Sarah Michelle Gellar and right, Callista Flockhart as *Ally McBeal*

his ritual female-empowering emasculation by being shot and confined to a wheelchair. You'll just have to hope it appears on terrestrial TV soon (OK, you insufferable Americans, I know you've already seen it. Now sit down and pay attention!) Suffice it to say, the ongoing tensions for the series are all set up, and by episode three he still hasn't actually recruited her, although they continue to work in parallel, as they have interests in common. But we have seen her women friends nearly kill her while trying to intervene on her behalf. And she is beginning to unbend. There are, of course, echoes of the non-humans-who-aspire-to-humanness in *Star Trek* here. However, Spock in the original series, Data in *The Next Generation*, Odo in *Deep Space Nine*, and Seven of Nine in *Voyager* all try to learn about humanity as outsiders. Here we have someone who is human but has been severely alienated – but then, how would you feel if your own government had been trying to kill you for ten years?

There appear to be plot holes you could put your foot through at the moment, but the intriguing thing about *Dark Angel* is that it doesn't seem to matter; as the story in each episode carries you forward, it generates both forward and backward tension as it feeds us snippets of her past, so that we end up feeling as if we are gradually piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of her back history during the missing past ten years, in exactly the way we do when we make new friends. There is a huge internet presence for this show, with vast amounts of back history for anyone who wants to trace it (and all still done in the gorgeously elegant Apple interface – I want one), and it was voted Best New Series in the USA last year, so look for it real soon on terrestrial British TV – my bet is on a massive autumn launch on BBC2.

Just a few quick mentions of other shows. *Farscape* looks well meaning, but suffers from a singular lack of imagination somewhere in its production. I can't encapsulate the plot for you, because I can't remember it. There is a gorgeous blue woman who is very reminiscent of Dax with her body tattoos, and a warrior alien with tentacles instead of hair, who look all the more silly when shown next to straightforward human beings. All I really remember about it is that every time I glanced at the screen I seemed to see people standing in a line wearing silly rubber masks and saying lines that none of them believed in.

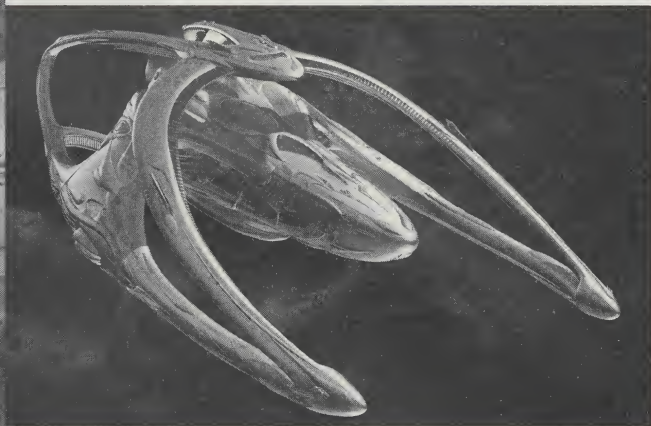
I haven't mentioned *Xena: Warrior Princess* (stop cheering at the back there – of course she belongs in a discourse on women in fantasy with super-powers) or *Hercules* because I haven't watched much of them. They seem silly

almost beyond belief to my quasi-adult eyes, more reminiscent of the wonderful Ray Harryhausen stop-motion movies of Ulysses or Sindbad or dinosaurs than any of the earnest character-building drama we have been discussing thus far. Having said that, Xena is more my sort of woman than any of the others. Oh, I like the pretty, delicate, pouty fragility of Buffy Summers or Max Guevara, but they are little girls in my eyes. Xena is a real woman, statuesque – everything that Wonder Woman promised but never delivered. Kevin Sorbo has been drooled over in these pages before, so I need say no more about *Hercules*.

Nevertheless, I need to talk about Sorbo, because he is the captain of the space ship in the latest Majel Roddenberry raid on her husband's estate, *Andromeda*. In one of the clunkiest first episodes I have ever seen, the entire crew of *Andromeda Ascendant*, the ship itself, and the back story, are all introduced in what might easily be mistaken for a video pitch for funding for the show. Briefly, this is the far future, there was an immense Commonwealth of planets, and they had a Space Navy called The High Guard. In an act of unparalleled treachery, the Nietscheans, sometime allies of the Commonwealth, turn on them, and the empire (sorry, *Commonwealth*) falls. During one of the battles, *Andromeda Ascendant* falls into a black hole, but not all the way, and becomes locked in stasis while time outside passes. Three hundred years on, someone tries to salvage her, and the sole survivor of the crew, Captain Dylan Hunt, is awakened by the ship to deal with the threat. Each member of the cast is introduced, and there is a scene where they all slot into what appears to be an advent calendar.

Examples of the Roddenberry touch are everywhere – there is an untrustworthy Nietschean, pragmatic about everything; a representative from a savage, uncompromising and disgustingly ugly warrior race, the Magog, who has embraced the universal religion of the time, and adopted the name Rev Bem (say it with me: Puhlease!); a little sparkly purple alien woman(?) who is the only known representative of her race; a little cowardly man who is a genius with technical stuff; a human woman, captain and owner of the salvage vessel whose main role appears to be to constantly argue with Dylan; and Dylan Hunt himself, bombastic, pompous, self-righteous, megalomaniac, and utterly convinced of his higher calling – in short, a typical James Tiberius Kirk. He even gets to utter a nonsensical uplifting monologue over the title credits.

But the real star of this show is the ship, *Andromeda Ascendant*. The physical ship itself is a stunning creation, looking like a cross between a sleigh and a pretzel. One of the things I adore



It's a Girl! It's a Ship! No! It's both! It's Andromeda: in either manifestation, she's shapely, sexy, and a deadly killing machine. Lexa Doig (left) plays Rommy, the ship's avatar in *Andromeda*.

about watching science fiction on telly is the spectacle of wonderful space ships set in endless reaches of star speckled space, and, like all its Roddenberry progenitors, *Andromeda* has these special effects in spades. But there's more. If it wasn't enough that the spaceship is so much stranger and more wonderful than anything called *Enterprise* could ever aspire to, this is far future, so the ship is run entirely by a distant descendant of the Majel Barrett-Roddenberry-voiced computer, an Artificial Intelligence also called Andromeda – she is the ship, after all – or "Rommy" for short. The superb, the wonderful aspect of this is that the ship can manifest herself in human form to make interaction with the crew easier, and the actress who plays this part, Lexa Doig, is stunning. She does all the feeling, the soulful, the stern and the vulnerable, that we have come to expect from a Roddenberry female, but with such verve and steel that you can forget sometimes that what you are watching is supposed to be a computer. The culture is definitely creeping in on the old rogue. I've loved *Star Trek* in every manifestation we've been presented with, but its attitudes to women have been looking a bit old-fashioned for a while. Rommy brings this bang up to date. If only the writers would stop playing silly buggers with names, and rerunning old *Star Trek* plots – for crissake, in one recent episode, Dylan manages to bridge time and make contact with the love of his life, and she's called Sara (Bob Dylan's long-time love and one-time wife is Sara, immortalized in the song of the same name) – then we might have another major show on our hands.

As it is, *Andromeda* seems likely to go the same way as Majel Roddenberry's previous raid on her husband's archives, *Earth, Final Conflict*. Here, the aliens have come to Earth, and apparently in the guise of peaceful sharing of their technologies, are in the process of taking over by stealth. There is an on-going story-line where the aliens gradually

grow towards the humans they interact with daily (go native, in the British argot) while these humans exploit the contact to try to ferret out the aliens plans. It's all great fun, has a superb female lead, and was ruined utterly for me by the network's insistence on killing off the male lead for someone younger and (purportedly) sexier in the second series. Again, the special effects are absolutely stunning, but never take over the story; they are there, everyday, as part of the story, and the show is superbly produced. What it, and *Andromeda* lack, is the feeling that there is an overall completion to the story that can be achieved. With *Andromeda*, Dylan Hunt's ambition to restore the Commonwealth seems too far fetched to be worthy of considering – so all we are left with is an over-large shell within which other stories can be told, and thus it feels rather hollow at times. *Earth, Final Conflict* has the much more achievable end of finding out what the aliens are up to, and either defeating them, being defeated by them or finding that they're not really baddies at all, but you get the distinct sense that this final revelation of the story's end is being unnecessarily postponed in order to allow more stories to be told within the shell it has created. The shell here also feels hollow, but this time because it is too large unnecessarily.

Finally, this is where *Dark Angel* scores on all counts. There is a believable backdrop, a nicely delineated back-story outline that can be filled in as necessary, good potential for character development, and a jaw-droppingly gorgeous nineteen-year-old woman at the centre who can look after herself. This is a perfect setting, and the fiction (apart from the rather cardboard baddies) is top rate. Of all the shows reviewed here, this is the one most likely to make it to prime-time terrestrial TV in Britain, and if it does, it will be a worthy reward for both its makers and its fans.

Evelyn Lewes

The Hills Are Alive

John Whitbourn



*Oxtedle Bottom and Bible Bottom
from Mount Caburn - May 1998*

Ascending the Downs by morning, I couldn't fend off the feculent image. Sussex's green answer to the Alps cried out for Julie Andrews to sweep over them, singing saccharine.

Armed with earplugs I wouldn't have minded. Some female company – even an ex-nun – would have gone down well.

Memories of the sixties and *The Sound of Music*: saving up my pocket money to take Mum to see the film – and her dozing off halfway. Still, it's the thought that counts...

I didn't fancy thoughts and thinking at the moment – or any time, truth be told. The way I see it, they only make heavy weather of life – prodding and poking the thing we're meant to just enjoy.

Sadly though, right then, I couldn't practise what I didn't preach. From waking alone in the hotel, through frigid breakfast and out into the day, two thoughts were at me like a dog with a bone and wouldn't give up *grrrring*.

"I like you as a friend." The feminine Armageddon option, thermo-nuclear end of everything, leaving only megadeaths and mutations behind. A hastily arranged extra single room for the night, tongue pie and cold shoulder for supper instead of cognac and condoms; then a chill early departure on the first London train this morning. "Have a nice life..." A South Downs Way walk for two now turned solo and celibate. Quel bummer.

The alternative mental chewing gum was "alive" with

what...? Of the two it was – marginally – preferable.

With "music"? I couldn't hear none, not even tweetie-bird song. My preference would be Sex Pistols (or Sussex Pistols – geddit ?) at concert pitch, but they weren't on tap and other hikers might object.

With life then? Hardly. I was the only bag-rat (*Sussex aborigine dialect term for complete-attire hikers [derog.]*) in sight. A distant tractor circled Arlington reservoir but, otherwise, aside from the sleepless A27, that was it. Yet there was the feeling of life, underfoot and all-around, even to my TV-dulled nerve endings. I'd felt it since rising hungover, lone and little in a wasted double bed that morning. The Long Man, Wilmington's looming chalk hill figure, oversaw my departure with added enigma. He'd looked ready to rise off Windover hill, sticks and all, and follow us. If he had it might have scared milady up the scale beyond "friendship" and then none of this would have happened.

The feeling persisted, whispering numinous, numinous in my ear, nipping my taxi-transported Doctor Martin heels, all the way to Glynde. I wasn't used to it. Numinous stopped at the airport boundary. Probably Heathrow Airport Ltd. have a bye-law on the subject.

People say "I never felt more alive" – usually something to do with adultery or Colombian snuff – but today it was the landscape telling me – and those soft options weren't open to the English landscape. I was the odd one out; the Quaker at the wife-swapping party, the queen in the brothel. All about me the joint was jumpin' and I the

conspicuous abstainer. It was a first. Weird.

Ladyfriend had left via Glynde station. Ever hopeful, ever opportunist, I'd accompanied her in the frigid taxi from *The Giant's Rest* in Wilmington. Only on the tiny platform and after a peck on the cheek worse than a slap, did all hope die. I strode off without a backward glance even before her train pulled away.

Something – but certainly not her blessing – followed me down the road. Something close and curious. I felt it in a clenching of shoulders and twin hot spots on my neck. Fearing a poncy opera-goer en route to nearby Glyndebourne, I span on my heels, a cheery “what d'you want – a photo?” half way across curled lips.

No one. Not even an *Independent* reading precious on their way to *Die Zauberflöte* and a hamper. I half wished there were. But no, nothing. The street, the bridge over Glynde Reach, were empty. A bit soon to panic yet though: no call for *Survivors* or Crusoe thoughts: commuting does that to some Sussex villages, eight till six, Monday to Friday.

I'd already been unfaithful to the South Downs Trail by motoring Wilmington to Glynde, doubtless missing out some peerless views and air like champagne. No wonder Mum Nature was filling the ether with static – similar, only more effective, than madam currently training it to Mordor. Something unthinking made me resolve to do the decent thing and slog the rest of the day's specified portion. A debt repaid, a spin on the wheel, and back to the proper course.

Doing the right thing did me no good – as ever; a lesson I relearnt time and again and always forgot. The feeling increased to chalk on blackboard proportions.

Quite an appropriate metaphor really. What else were the Downs but chalk protuberances, moulded into feminine curves by the Almighty in saucy mood? It was walking on them for the first time that had given me ideas last night. And what was chalk but the calcified shells of billions of little marine martyrs, drifting slow down to rest at the bottom of a prehistoric sea. That ocean was now gone, the chalk thrust up and lightly coated with sheep-cropped green, but that was how it got here. If any hills should feel alive underfoot, these were they.

I kept that in mind like a mantra all the way to the base of Mount Caburn. I sang it during a local ice-cream (recommended) refuel at Glynde post office, just by the base of the prescribed path up. Yet sing it how you like it didn't account for the feeling.

The stile over the fence co-operated, the turf underboot sprang with sentient strength. Even the Sussex sun on my back conspired in the high weirdness, its energies held back at the last moment after their eight minute journey from the nuclear fires of home. The warmth faltered and spread a few feet over my head, forming a canopy under which I walked, confined, a fly under a moving glass dome.

I took my personal parasol with me, slowly up the stiff slope. Eight hundred feet later (said the Guide) was an iron-age camp, excavated by...

blah, blah blah. The book got stuffed back in my bag, careless of dog-earing. More interested in the notion that my path was dogged, I looked back down towards Glynde – for the umpteenth time – half expecting to see a wake left in the green.

As before, there was nothing of the kind – bar a knowingness to the breeze driving me and events before it. Down below, Grecian-style St. Mary's, the stone wyverns outside Glynde place, even distant Glyndebourne Opera House, bespoke normality – or what passes for the Sussex equivalent. I both didn't believe a word of it and yet had to accept, all at the same time. In a very low class of duck and weave I reckoned a simple dash over the brow of Caburn would both take me out of sight and trouble. Still feeling the entire focus of Nature's infinite eyes I went for it.

Oft-times there were hang-gliders atop Caburn's cap; I'd seen them when driving past: gaudy butterflies defacing the scene. Right now they'd have been as welcome as a bank holiday, but I somehow knew – revealed in a dream style – it wouldn't have benefited me. Something had dropped a chasm between me and the rest of creation this day and no mere socialising would have overcome it. I doubt they'd have even seen me.

“Elf ointment” said a wicked voice beside my ear – and chuckled. Then it brushed past, no respecter of space or person, and went ahead. That breath of passage, I both accepted and rejected by dint of double-think, trailblazed my path – although I didn't yet know it.

Over the hill – well, I didn't reckon I was yet, and so mentally girded the loins – over the hill was a whole new rolling harem of green curvature, leading down to Lewes and the River Ouse. “Bible Bottom” and Lewes Golf Club said my retrieved, mistreated, guide, then “Zion in the Downs,” County Town of East Sussex. “Lost Galedin” as per the “Iolo Manuscripts,” “founded by survivors of a drowned land, probably Atlantis” – which settled the book's hash. I flung the useless, new-age thing away to mislead some other mug punter.

There were precipitous chalk tracks, stiles and gates, a paucity of unvandalised signs and the usual bag-rat entrancing stuff like the phallic Lewes Martyrs Memorial, but I'll spare you it – as I did myself. Shields raised, warp factor 9 and running essential systems only, I put all pretence aside, acting like the real me. It felt better: more comfortable all round. Nature's wonders passed by without me rudely staring at them. I was a man with a mission. Chapel Hill and then Lewes High Street here I come.

The White Hart Inn had an open fire and heated pool. The Lewes Arms nearby came with a rave review from a heavy drinking acquaintance. I was prior booked for the one and destined for the other. A bath, a swim, a talent survey and then serious lager abuse. Stuff hiking. If my mood or love-life didn't improve before tomorrow, I'd ring ahead and cancel the remaining stages.

The warm water of the White Hart swept



away all care and lingering doubts. I became again the sleek beast who knew what he wanted and loved what he got – often. The improperly active Downs loomed all around the town but you could still – just about – shut them out. A mere dash down one of the town's distinctive short-cut “twittens” was The Lewes Arms. The spirit of head down, no nonsense, mindless hedonism lent wings to my boots.



It was smaller, harder to find than expected: a cheese segment end of a building, car-verboten, only approached by twittens. You gained the bar via a hall just like some aunty's house; an uncompromising Town Coat-of-Arms – six foot square – was in your face before any danger of a beer. It was crowded, but not too much – anonymity but not claustrophobia. Rooms span off the main bar at odd angles: quiet alcoves for those who wanted; a regular's hurly-burly at the hub. Around the walls were ancient pictures – never mind what they were, I liked their dust. I liked everything. There was even a fire.

“A Stella. No, make it two.”

Having known a Stella I only wished it were her. Cold beer would have to do instead of a hot woman.

The bullet-head barman flicked a look for company, didn't find it but caught the “just-do-it” in my eyes and poured on.

I took the golden glasses to beside the fire, licking my lips. A few feet back from the bar-melée there was quiet round a table, with space for me. The only other partaker looked like he preferred his own company – which suited me. Clad in ethnic Downs Country native dress (old barbour, cap and wellies), seated before a mortally wounded pint, he seemed the type to keep his opinions to himself. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

“I'm here for Bonfire,” says he – could only be to me.

“Triffic.”

“You don't know what Bonfire is, do you?”

“Nope.”

He told me, and despite myself I listened. A whole week of misrule in an English town, centred round Guy Fawkes's brave try: wild fireworks, procession, subversive tableaux consigned to the flames, flaming tar-barrels flung around. You joined your Bonfire society at birth and stayed there to journey's end, a wild fraternity that would see you right through thick and thin. It sounded like our idealised Sarf London concept of “he's family, innee...” I wasn't so keen on outsiders pinching that.

“You're a bit early – ages yet.”

Matey wasn't fazed. He scanned the sock-interior-like surrounds. It really had got cosy; like there was only him and me.

“I like to be around: weeks before. Drink up the atmosphere.”

And he did drink up, draining the straight glass, till froth-lace decorated his goatee. Then it filled again, from bottom up. He drank again, relishing the replenishment and set down another empty. That too did the decent thing.

Now I let myself accept that the cosy thing wasn't pub ambience but the giant finger from off the Downs – destiny giving me its undivided attention. It was all a bit urgent of the Man upstairs. He could at least have let me make love to my Stella.

“Who are you?”

His eyes were lively as a fox in a henhouse; oval, naughty.

“A gamekeeper.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Of sorts.”

We exchanged glances, but not of equals.

“HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP! HELP!”

I ought to have guessed and saved my dignity. They couldn't hear me: we were removed. And even if they could there were better distractions than some weirdo hysteric. A proper parade of small-arms fire broke out outside.

“Bonfire Society – Officer's birthday,” explained the spirit of the Barbour. “Lewes Rousers.' Absolutely illegal,

of course. Home-made incendiaries, unlicensed, after 'lighting-up time.'”

The smoke and cordite smell drifted in: take it or leave it. Lovely.

“Sweet,” says he, “is the smell of powder, in the cause that is righteous’ – Guy Fawkes – top man!”

This was the window for obvious questions; like what cause? Why? And so on. But that was just footslogger stuff. Instead, like a sensible fellow, I buried my lips into Stella.

He recognised the urge to wisdom and raised his eternal glass to me.

“You're the game I'm keepin' at the moment. I've been herding you over the Downs and – oh, slow, slow, slow...”

“Sorry.”

He gurned his nut-brown face; the first expression of disapproval.

“Wrong tradition. Keep your repentance. See her?”

A hairy hand singled out a gothic vision across the bar.



Sussex-voluptuous; early blooming, probably long lasting: all cotton-print dress and late nights.

"Got her."

"If you like."

And he showed me a Lewes future together: something or other happiness: modest but tapped into deep roots. Fetching barrels from Harveys Ltd. for the boy's twenty-first at the rugby club. The girls' white weddings in a Downs church. Final days with it sussed, looking up at the green hills though too feeble to climb them. 1662 send off at St Michael's, School Hill; my ashes ascending Caburn even if I couldn't.

"Could be worse. Or?"

To give him credit, he showed no preference. In my throbbing skull I saw a black and chrome bar, the sort of more me place I'd go. Probably Croydon or up-Town. A rangy blonde was dancing, a trouser-crowder but brainy with it, going places and spreading a fair wake. I saw the upshot too – no debate over Heinz or own-brand baked-beans there.

Success in Babylon or authentic littleness? To be or half-be.

"Why me?"

My fiend showed me his teeth and they were white and sharp and shiny.

"The Choice, son of man. Everyone has it, without exception. Only you're so brick-thick it has to be put plain – shoved right in your mush. Even you understand now, right?"

Sure I did, but wasn't going to admit it. I shrugged, real admirable I'm-in-charge-of-this-mere-meat stiff upper lip stuff.

"All bar who you are."

He sighed and peered round, like he could see inside my head.

"Nature abhors a vacuum," he reproved me – and stretched out a leg.

I was wrong about the wellies, misled by the under-table shadows. What emerged from the moleskin breeks was hairy and cloven. It tapped out a wild little dance upon the parquet.

Rising back to vertical I still wore a little disbelief.

"Great Pan is Dead!" he recited, merrily enough.

"Plutarch: *De Oraculorum Defectu*. Not a lie, but not the whole truth either. Wounded, he lingers on, welcome, in a few places..."

I looked. He wasn't a bad lad – more like a dangerous pal. Levelly, older-brotherly, he returned the gaze.

"The big question now," he laughed, "is whether he's welcome in your life?"

Wife number 4 – all blonde hair and tight clefts – was finding a native to hook up the boat. Imperious tones from the fore-deck suggested partial success. I left her to it, still residual-sensitive to memsahib manners. And besides, the Harbour Bar beckoned. I hadn't had a scotch for minutes.

Because the Aga Khan had sailed in that day, there were fireworks later, and they made me think of England. These were better, more expensive certainly, but not, I think made with wild love. I missed that in my life.

Here, November didn't bother us. We could still rely on some sun to further lizard our skin. Wife 4 positively wouldn't be without it. I wouldn't have even dared mention Lewes to her. There'd be lawyers before she'd venture that gig, even for a day, and my weak, operated-upon heart, wasn't up to combat – not even in a good, a righteous cause.

So they'd had to do without me, as they had done, without noticing, every year since.

And yet, and yet... as I watched from the deck, seeing rockets ascend to heaven, I did wonder, I admit. Some got there, but others, the more flash, seemed to expend themselves en route, falling short.



John Whitbourn last appeared in IZ 135. Of John Christopher, he says, "I count three specific passages in his work as unequalled highs amongst my encounter with sf (and literature in general): Henry's self-sacrifice on the dome; the final chilling words of *The Prince in Waiting* series; and, strangely, the despair of 'the Hermit of the Island' on having his boat stolen in *The Tripods*. I well recall the last causing a young JAW to reflect on the little casualties of even high causes."



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Partial Eclipse

Graham Joyce

D.E.H. 01

I know that Myra goes to bed every night and whispers, Dear God please let the aliens come back.

It's morning, and a diffuse winter sunlight bleeds through the curtains. I roll over in bed and stroke the warm, tanned swelling of Myra's belly, feeling the quickening under the callused pads of my fingers. It's just a tiny vibration, not unlike the attack note on the E-string. Myra opens her eyes sleepily and smiles at me. It's all beautiful. I want it to be beautiful. But now every expectant mother and father wants their infant to be born with an alien inside them

"Anything," I say?

She gives a tiny shake of her head, no. Just as she has done for nearly seven years now. Just as I do when she asks me.

"You?"

But she doesn't really have to ask. She knows that if the answer was yes then I would have woken her to tell her. Instead, so we don't have to think about it, I stroke her belly, because I know that by running the heel of my hand along the rim of her thrilling pink pot I can make the baby kick. And it does. *She* does.

"I saw her foot!" I shout. I can still see it. Or maybe it's an elbow, but anyway it tracks along the curve of Myra's belly, rippling flesh as it goes, and then withdraws.

"You're convinced it's a girl," she says. "You're wrong."

Myra's awake now. She'll have to get out of bed. She's about a week away from her time, and I know the baby is pressing on her bladder. But as she swings her legs out of bed she pauses, strokes her huge stomach and says,

"There was a moment. In the middle of the night."

"Yes?" I hardly dare breathe.

"No, it wasn't anything really. It was just..."

"Tell me."

"I can't say for sure. I had to go to the bathroom, and it was in that moment when I was waking up, half-asleep, I thought I heard my baby calling to me. Would that count?"

I lie back thinking, would that count? Would it count? I don't know.

"I mean," says Myra, "I know he *can't* call to me, so it might have been a dream. Or I might have simply imagined it because I so badly wanted to dream?"

I nod but it sounds to me like, no, it doesn't count. You see there have been these rumours, about pregnant women dreaming. *New Wives' Tales*, you might call them. We've been yearning for it to happen since Myra's pregnancy was first confirmed.

Nothing.

I get up and ready myself for work. I can hear our daughter Mandy stirring in her room. Myra sees me select the Blucher. I love the unusual workmanship. The belly is spruce and the back, waist and neck are polished maple. The hole is slightly elliptical, shaping a delicious ooze and throb in the resonance.

She raises her eyebrows as I lay the guitar in the battered carrying case and gently lock the clasps. "We're re-recording Teppi's early piece." God, it's hard to sound enthusiastic.

"Not that old thing! Didn't you do that a couple of years

ago?"

"Six years ago," I point out. "And we're doing this much slower. Slow. Very slow."

"Surely there's more you could do than that!" And she looks at me, because she knows it makes me sad. She kisses me and off I go to work.

Floyd picks me up. He has his cello in the boot, so I lay the Blucher gently in the back seat. "I've got one for you," he says brightly.

My heart sinks, and I stare at the stalled traffic ahead. "Go on."

"He's six years old. Last week he drew hundreds of people in Manchester. Hundreds. The week before that, Leeds, and you couldn't get a seat."

I've heard all this routine before. "What does he play?"

"That's it. He's not a musician. He's a storyteller."

"Give us a break, Floyd! Six years old?"

"He's in town tomorrow night. You and Myra, me and Zelda."

Like I say, I've been down this road before with Floyd. Mostly with kiddie musos, admittedly, but with the occasional storyteller too. It is a road of stony disappointment every time, but Floyd is a sucker. He wants to believe. He needs to. Maybe I'm mean, but you wouldn't get me to part with the price of the tickets any more, and Floyd knows that. There are too many spivs fleecing decent, hopeful people like Floyd and Zelda.

Floyd reads my thoughts. "My treat," he says. "Now then, do you know what we're doing today?"

"Sure." It's getting even harder to sound bright. "Early Teppi."

"Aw fuck!" says Floyd. "Not Teppi again. That really has spoiled my day." And he leans hard on his horn just to prove it, scaring a hapless cyclist.

And even though I try hard to fake it, I have to admit that down in the recording studio it's a fucking bore, all day long. It's not Teppi's fault. Teppi is wonderful, complex and varied. But it's not enough. Even if I had never heard Teppi before; even if I hadn't recorded him faster, slower, *con brio*, who cares, we just can't make ourselves bleed for him. He, like all the others, takes the awful blame for not being *new*.

Floyd tries. We all try. Mid-morning I see Floyd's shiny black skin, like an aubergine, perspiring from the point on his receding hairline as he works his cello for the complicated 5th. A crackling voice from the control box cuts in and we're told to take a break. Moments later I walk into the washroom and I hear Floyd weeping. He's bent over a basin so he doesn't know I'm there. I leave before he sees me.

While waiting for Floyd to emerge from the washroom I talk with Vanessa. Always bright, always jolly, Vanessa is a brick. Superb pianist. Before the aliens left, Vanessa had a dazzling career ahead of her, with three recordings of her own steely jazz-rock compositions under her belt. Of course, that was nearly seven years ago, but she doesn't seem to let it get her down.

Floyd swings out of the bathroom, chipper, all smiles now he sees Vanessa, so he pours himself a cup of Dar-

jeeling and treats us to one of his jokes. Old jokes, of course. He knows Vanessa will laugh. He knows I will too. Gosh, it's a very old one. So old I see the punch-line labouring up the hill like a knackered cart-horse, and unfortunately I laugh a moment too soon.

The following evening we put on best bib and tucker and turn up at the De Montfort Hall, where this six-year-old is expected to perform. Myra is somewhat uncomfortable, being so big, but she doesn't want to disappoint Floyd and Zelda. Anyway after the baby arrives she knows we won't get out so much.

"Oh, let me!" Zelda admires Myra's bump, placing the flat of her palm on the underbelly. Zelda has beautiful long manicured fingers. She and Floyd have kids of their own, but almost grown up. "It's a boy," she says. "You're carrying at the front."

That's what they said about Mandy. Nobody really knows.

Then Zelda stoops, and puts her cheek against Myra's bump, as if she's trying to listen through the distended skin and into the womb. "Oh please let him dream!" she says softly.

We're caught. Trapped. Left dangling by Zelda's overt remark, and we all look away. A disembodied voice on the PA tells us that the performance will commence in three minutes.

"Come on," Floyd says.

I think he looks slightly angry.

We take our seats, and I'm amazed that the hall is full to capacity. I mean we've all been hoaxed and duped and gypped and bilked so many times over the last few years you'd think it impossible to fill a hall this size ever again. But no. As I swing round checking for faces I might recognise, I see there's not a single vacant seat. The house lights go down, there's some nervous coughing, the curtains open.

First a warm-up act, a seven-piece jazz ensemble. Floyd looks at me as if to say, not bad but not good either, though we're both pretty stern critics. I recognise the opening piece but I can't put a name to it: Floyd will know. The fact is my mind is on the kid, and I don't like it.

Six years old. That's the ticket, isn't it? Six. I just don't like the idea of this six year old having to carry the weight of expectation – and the inevitable disappointment – of the 1500 people in the audience. I think of my own six-year-old Mandy at home with her babysitter, and how I would never allow her to be put through this.

But there's big money in it, and even when it goes wrong, the promoters, and presumably the kid's parents, get to pocket the admissions charges. Because nothing can ever be proved, conclusively, can it?

Polite applause despatches the ensemble and the stage is re-arranged for the kid. Big chair in the middle, overhead microphone, one chair either side for what I see in the programme are the kid's "guardians" rather than his parents. I point this out to Myra.

"Cynical," she says. I think she means the manipulation of the kid but she adds, "You're so cynical." She strokes her bulge. I know the chair isn't comfortable for her.

The kid comes on and he's a funny looking thing. He's

wearing a starched collar too big for his neck. He's pale under the limelight, his hair is plastered to his head and his ears stick out like wing-nuts. Poor little runt. But he looks precociously unflustered by the size of the audience. His "guardians" take their seats either side of him as the kid is introduced by the MC. Polite applause dies down and the kid waits, creating a tension in the hall, and I know, I just *know*, he's been coached to do this.

He leans forward slightly, and says, "Once upon a time."

And the audience goes wild. Rapturous applause. This is irony, you see. Laid on with a teaspoon. From a six-year-old. It's a little message to critical observers like myself; for the sceptics and the doubters and disbelievers. It's post-post-post-modern. Or something. From a six-year-old sprog. And the audience laps it up.

It takes a while for this little riot to die down before he launches into the story proper. And though I have to admit it, he's not bad for a six-year-old. He delivers well, his story is pacy, he's got good kiddie timing and he speaks clearly. What more could anyone want?

The one thing we all want. The one thing we would willingly sacrifice all the above qualities to have.

I identify the story after just a few minutes. Most people in the audience don't yet, but they will, because the narrative pattern will occur to them. It happens to be an old Romanian folk-tale, about a bear who walks through an anonymous landscape meeting other animals, challenging all of them to guess what he has under his hat. How do I know it? Because two years ago we re-recorded almost the complete collection of Moldovan's work – faster or slower, I can't recall – and there was a libretto borrowing from the tale. Floyd has clocked it too, because he turns to me with an expression of apology on his face. I smile back thinly.

I mean what are we supposed to do? Interrupt the proceedings and denounce the six year old in front of 1500 people? Jump to my feet and shout, "This isn't original! I spy a Romanian folk tale!"

Nah. In any event there is already a sense of attention slumping in the audience. Many have worked it out for themselves. The familiar narrative pattern, linked with inauthenticities in the manner the kid has been trained to deliver, will give it away. But an audience in denial is an astonishing thing, and the kid holds it for twelve minutes before ending the tale.

The audience applauds loudly, but, and it's a significant but, not so loudly as they greeted his opening line. The MC proposes a break, and promises us another performance by the ensemble before the prodigy will offer us a second tale.

Not for us. We're out of there, as are a reasonable percentage of the audience judging by the bustling cloak-room activity. "Well," says Zelda, helping Myra on with her coat. "I hadn't heard it before."

"Me neither," says Myra, huffily.

Floyd's levitated eyebrows exhort me to say nothing. We adjourn to The Long Memory for a drink before home.

And a drink turns into seven or eight, as it must. There has been a lot more drunkenness these last few

years, a lot more alcoholism. Drink and drugs: they give a semblance of dreaming, don't they? Helping us to remember. An approach to dreaming. A dullard's kick against the thick, thick ice.

"A man walks into a bar," says Floyd.

We're trying to invent a joke again. It's a dead loss, because there hasn't been a new joke in almost seven years, but we're pissed as newts in a pickle jar so we try anyway. Floyd says, start with the old structures, it makes things easier.

"A man walks into a bar..."

"Says, 'ouch!'" Zelda chips in.

"Old. Very, very old," Myra says. She's not drinking because of the baby. Her tolerance for our "hilarious" drunkenness is wearing thin. She's already reached for her coat.

"Really?" Zelda protests. "I thought I'd just made it up. I really did." She's slurring.

"A man bars into a walk." Floyd says.

"Give us a break!" Myra almost screams. "Come on Jonathan, take me home."

I think it's the interpreting I miss most. Though an interpreted dream is a punctured dream, at least in those days you could be certain of a steady supply, and the fun was in the mystery, the guessing, the deconstructing, the reassembling. We can all out-argue Freud when we own the theatre.

We say goodnight to Floyd and Zelda; lush, slobbering kisses all round. They stay for another drink, as I shamble out of the swinging doors of The Long Memory, supported by my heavily pregnant wife. I complain bitterly about being made to leave early.

"It was time," Myra says. "You know what will happen after the next drink. Floyd will get weepy. Then Zelda will get weepy because Floyd is weepy. Then we'll all have a stupid argument the subject of which no-one will remember. Come on, stand up."

"It's only the booze," I say as we reach the car.

Myra gets into the driver's seat. She can barely fit her bump under the steering wheel. "The thing is," she says, tickling the ignition into life, "in knowing when it's time to go."

Time to go. The aliens presumably knew it was time to go. Everyone can remember the moment when they quit the planet. When they quit *us*. And just as with the Kennedy assassination, everyone knows what they were doing at the time it happened: they were sleeping.

The aliens appeared to everyone in a dream. Not the same dream exactly, but almost. You see the aliens had to take some form in which to say farewell. For some it was a grandmother, for others a long lost friend. For others still, a pet dog they'd had as a kid: for me my beloved collie, Nelly, long dead. But the message was the same. *Thank you for hosting us*, they said. *We're very grateful*, they said. *But we've had enough*, they said.

They were apologetic that their stay was so brief. Five hundred thousand years residing inside our heads was, for them, a regrettably short stay. The twinkle of an eye. It was short but interesting, they said. But they dearly

hoped that we had enjoyed the fruits of their presence as much as they had enjoyed an exhilarating ride.

Everyone remembers being addressed in the same way, whether by grandmother or dog. Polite, somewhat formal, slightly abashed. Then the dream image had transformed into a cube of black light on a black background, before infolding into complete absence. The world awoke to a stunned comprehension of what had happened.

Since which time no-one has dreamed.

Not a flicker. Lacunae on a global scale. A collective lobotomy.

Back home, Myra climbs into bed as I gargle with mouthwash and brush my teeth and try to sober up a bit. I know if I flop into bed the world will spin and I'll feel the nausea, so instead I go into my daughter's room and watch her sleeping.

I perch on the edge of Mandy's bed, just watching her. In the moment of observing her sleep her room becomes a peaceful chapel or a quiet temple. Wind-chimes tinkle softly at the window open a little to the night air. I sense her sleeping spirit at large, roaming, restless, looking for something, a Neverland, a Narnia. She's flying, but she can't find anywhere to land. I love her so much I could cry. She's seven years old, and she has never dreamed.

I have this confession to make: in the dark, at night, while she's sleeping, I whisper things in the delicate conch of my sleeping child's ear. Any things. Remembered fables. Old tales. Strange stories. Religious parables. Fragments. Anything which occurs to me. Heaven knows why, but the other day I head myself saying *Allah is great, there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet*. Then I sung her a song in French about dancing on the bridge of Avignon.

Trying to create dreams for her. Trying to pierce the shell, hole the ice.

It took us a while to work out that the aliens hadn't *stolen* our dreams. The aliens *were* the dreams. It was difficult for us to understand initially, generations of us brought up on notions of aliens as basically humanoid with latex rubber heads, or with blue skin, or as disembodied human brains encased in a pink gas.

The aliens residing in the consciousness of humanity for half a million years were a benevolent virus. They needed symbiosis, a host to achieve sentience, and that is what we gave them. What did they give us in return? Stories, music, religion. Tools, scientific ideas. Jokes, connections. The synaptic fire.

After their departure they became known to us as Prometheans.

Since when our stories have dried up. Our music has frozen. Our science is arrested. No-one has had an original notion in seven years. We are lodged in the mud of time, fossilised. We are consigned to limbo, and the cold wind of uncreation howls in our ears like a demon. Our species, all of humanity, has become the preterite, the passed over. Our psychic teeth, pulled.

And at nights I whisper in my child's tender ear, trying and failing to incubate the glory of dreaming.

Myra wakes in the morning and, with a struggle, sits up in bed. I blink my eyes open, and she shakes her head, no, again. She hauls herself to her feet and walks naked to the bathroom, magnificent and comical, the morning light shining on the stretched skin of her huge pot. She mutters something about swollen feet, and I wonder if our baby is going to arrive on the seventh anniversary of the departure of the aliens.

We are post-dreaming now, of course. Almost a new way of dating human history, ante- and post-dreaming. For academics, at any rate. The huge joke (I use the word loosely) is that in the entire field of intellectual endeavour only certain academics – critical theorists, social commentators and cultural analysts – proceed as if nothing has happened, busily producing unfathomable papers on post-dreaming society.

Of course, not everyone buys the idea that we've lost it. Creativity, I mean. Originality. Innovation. Breakthrough. Those slavering puppies up at the University for example, publishing their breathtakingly incomprehensible theses and self-serving tracts. But they're about the only ones. Hence the spectacle of six-year-old prodigies conning huge audiences desperate for the succour of the new.

Myra is thinking about something. She returns from the bathroom stroking her belly, two deep vertical creases between her eyebrows. "Out with it," I say.

She sits on the bed again, but with her back to me. "What if," she begins, "what if there were not innumerable aliens?"

I think I know what's coming. It has occurred to me already.

"I mean," she continues, "it would be odd, wouldn't it, if there were exactly the same number of aliens as there were people, and they just happened to match up, one apiece as it were. Are you with me?"

"Yes. Go on."

"So what if really there was only one alien. Inhabiting all of us. And that single alien decided to leave us. That would make more sense, wouldn't it?"

"It's a thought," I say, trying to sound light.

"Then that single alien who left us. Might that be what we've always called God?"

This is too complicated. I don't want to think about this, so I just kiss Myra and go downstairs to make some coffee.

Is this the end? Have we arrived at some feeble conclusion to human history, terrible in its banality? Not the nightmare end. Not the four horsemen. Not the holocaust, nor the nuclear winter nor the global warming, nor the asteroid storm. Just this exhaustion. Just this absence. Like a watch-spring run down.

I think this might be worse than the apocalyptic ending. The absence of poetry, of music, of narrative; this muted fanfare; the end of the never-ending-movie. Not by fire or ice, but by indifference. An indifference that leaves us at the mercy of eternity.

Mandy is up and awake. Warm spring sunlight streams through the windows. She has the door open and

is running for the swing I erected for her under the big old lilac tree. I leave the coffee to bubble and follow her out. The lilac flower is rampant, intoxicating.

Mandy sees me. She giggles. "Push me, Daddy! Come on!"

And I push her back and forth, and she moves from shadow into light with each swing. She wants to go dangerously high. "Faster, Daddy, Faster!"

Then I see the expression change on her face, and I step back to allow the swing to slow. "What is it?"

She spits something into her hand, and it's with relief I see it's only a milk tooth, slightly bloody at the root. It's her last one. She hands me the milk tooth as if she's trusting me with a precious stone or a talisman. I'm not sure what to do with it.

"Push me again! Higher! Higher!"

First contact was something we speculated about for a hundred years. Of course *they* would be carbon-based, even roughly humanoid; of course *they* would somehow vocalise; of course *they* would occupy the same plane of time and space. Not intersecting like this. Not like a finger of smoke inserted into the brain. How could we have guessed that *first contact* was already made perhaps half a million years ago?

Mandy swings from shadow into the dappled morning sunlight, giggling, calling for me to push her higher and higher, and I clutch Mandy's milk-tooth, a droplet of dew in my fist, and I think: is it One alien? Or is it one for each of us? And I wonder what I'm going to tell Mandy come the day she asks me.

Myra comes out to us in her silk kimono, sleepily pushing a stray curl behind her ear. Mandy jumps off the swing to let her mother sit, a sincere gesture but one copied from adults around her these last couple of months. But she wants to push Myra on the swing.

"Gently," Myra says. "Just gently. I don't want to go high."

I go back in and bring out the coffee on a tray. Mandy pushes Myra gently back and forth on the swing, babbling happily, and I notice Myra is frowning. She mouths something at me and points to her ear, indicating I should listen.

"...and she said they were sorry. It was a long time. They wouldn't normally have gone such a long time and they didn't like to leave for longer periods than they had stayed, but they couldn't help it and anyway a long time ago is the same as the near future for them and tomorrow is half the length of only a part of yesterday and —"

I stop Mandy from talking and I stall the swing. "Who? Who said this?"

"Nelly," says Mandy still intent on pushing Myra back and forth, and the overpowering scent of the lilac makes me feel giddy and I say, "Who is Nelly?"

"Don't be silly Daddy, you know Nelly. She's a dog. She was your dog when you were a little boy. Have you still got my tooth?"

"Yes, yes, I've still got it here," and I'm holding this tray of coffee and I don't know what to do with it. "When did Nelly tell you this?"

"In the night while I was asleep, Nelly came and told me she was sorry to be away so long but she was back and all her friends would come back —"

"Jonathan!" says Myra, but I'm too interested in what Mandy is saying to look up.

I sweep Mandy up in my arms and hurry back inside, where I switch on the television. Mandy is still speaking, "— and I had a little talk with Selina in Mummy's tummy because I know she's a girl though you don't know and —"

"Jonathan!" Myra calls from the garden, but it's all over the television.

Reports flooding in from Auckland and Fiji, from Vladivostok and Brisbane and from Osaka and Jakarta! And from Islamabad and Nairobi, from Israel and Cairo, Eastern Europe, anywhere where people go to sleep and wake up before we do, and nearer to home, too, people waking from dreaming, rushing out into the streets in tears and madness just to try to recount what has

happened to them in the night, not everyone, to be sure, but millions yes millions of people, maybe half the global population, dreaming dreams, spilling their experiences as the report sweeps across the globe like the shadow of an eclipse, or a tsunami of unparalleled joy, or a single note resonating around the planet and I don't know if it was all a warning, or a punishment or an aberration but whatever it was we are going to be allowed to dream again, dream and create, and I know that this time we need to be more careful but my heart is bursting as I understood we are to be give back our wings.

"JONATHAN!"

I rush back out into the garden and Myra is gazing at me with a strange expression, half desperation, half appeal and her kimono has fallen open and the sunlight flares on a mercurial rivulet along her thigh and it has started and I want to put down the coffee and to listen more to Mandy and to watch the sensational news reports on TV and to get my wife to hospital and I want to hand back the tooth and I'm staring, staring at the heraldic trickle, the silver proclamation, unable to do



anything, paralysed by the torrent of words my daughter is speaking and while I am drunk on lilac and immine-
nence.

"Jonathan," Myra says firmly, hauling herself out of the swing. "Just put the coffee down."

So I put the tray of coffee down on the grass and I go and get the pre-packed bags and when I've got the car ready Myra and Mandy get in.

"Selina will be my sister, wont she?" says Mandy.

"Yes. Fasten your seat belt."

"Selina will have lots of dreams, won't she?"

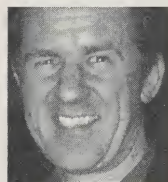
"Yes," I say, sparking the car into life.

Mandy thinks for a bit. "Is Selina coming now?"

"Yes," Myra says. "You're very sure it's a girl, aren't you?"

"Yes," Mandy replies, "because in the night they told me that another half a million years is starting. Have you still got my tooth?"

I say yes, I still have her tooth. It is still squeezed in my fist like a token of some miraculous covenant as I drive us to the hospital, because the baby is coming.



Graham Joyce has appeared in *Interzone* several times, most recently with "The Mountain Kills People" in IZ127, and is the author of many fine novels. His first novel, *Dreamside*, was recently given its first hardback edition in the US, and the haunting novella "Leningrad Nights" has just been published as half of one of

Millenium's new Binary books, paired with James Lovegrove's "How the Other Half Lives."

interzone

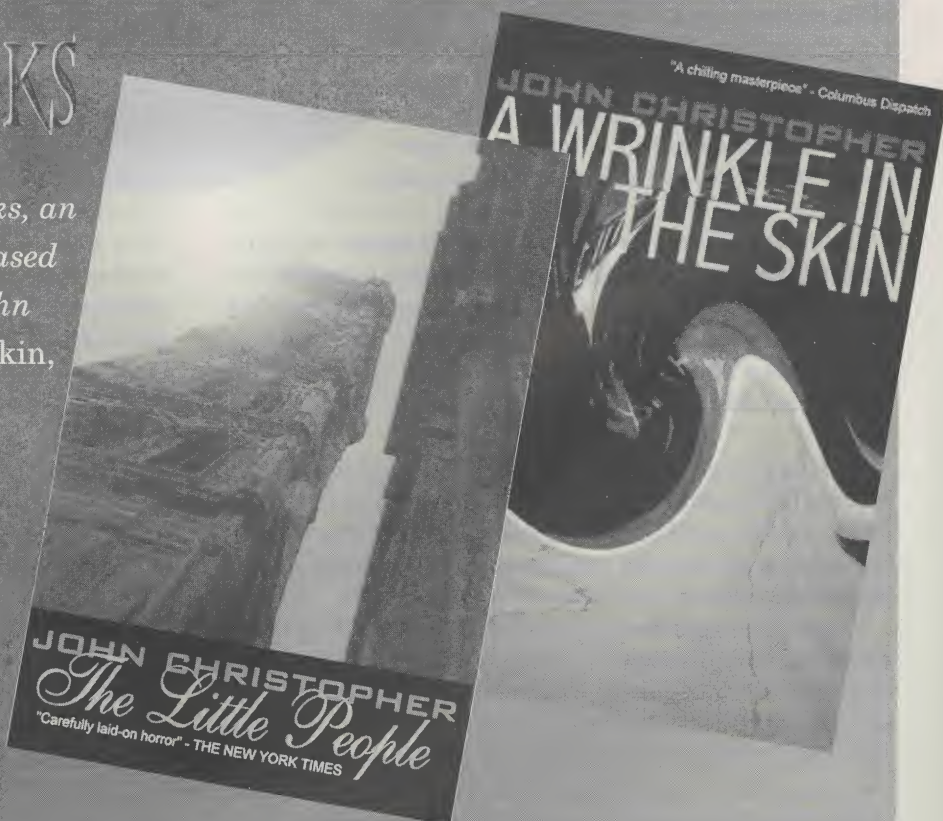
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COSMOS BOOKS

*In January 2001, Cosmos Books, an imprint of Wildside Press, released trade paperback editions of John Christopher's **Wrinkle in the Skin**, **The Little People**, and **The Possessors**. **The Year of the Comet** followed in February, **The 22nd Century** in March, and a new John Christopher short story collection is planned for July. For more information visit our website: www.oivas.com/cosmos*



Thog has always enjoyed the way that H. P. Lovecraft – notoriously pale, weedy, reclusive and hypochondriac – wrote letters saying things like “I am naturally a Nordic – a chalk-white, bulky Teutonic killer of the Scandinavian or North-German forests – a Viking – a berserk killer – a predatory rover of the blood of Hengist and Horsa – a conqueror of Celts and mongrels and founder of Empires – a son of the thunders and the arctic winds, and brother to the frosts and the auroras – a drinker of foeman’s blood from new-picked skulls...” (1923) However, I’m less keen on Lovecraft’s view of my own countryfolk, as passed on by a gleeful correspondent: “The Welsh, who have no Teutonic blood, are of little account.” (1915)

THE SILENT THREE

Ray Bradbury reportedly went blind in his left eye during a November signing session, with no hope of recovery.

Ken MacLeod marvels at reviewers’ uncanny talents, as evidenced by rave coverage of *Cosmonaut Keep* in the January *SFX*. “It includes a plot summary about rival families and space arks... which was posted by Orbit when I was still planning the book (and which still appears on Amazon) but which has nothing to do with the book I eventually wrote. Thus the reviewer appears to have read the book I didn’t write. Perhaps a sub-editor cut’n’pasted the wrong plot summary, but I prefer to hope that *SFX* has opened a gate to another timeline, thus Turning Science Fiction Into Science Fact, and is up for the physics Nobel in the ‘best prozine’ category.”

Terry Pratchett was again caught red-handed when a fan letter sternly enquired: “Did you get the name Hogswatch from Hogwarts?” Brooding on this, he muttered, “I’m inclined to say yes.”

Justina Robson of *Silver Screen* fame won one of the two writer’s bursaries presented for the first time in 2000 by Amazon.co.uk.

John Sladek, still fondly remembered, made an unexpected appearance in a posh London bookshop... or rather, his literally unique interactive storybook “The Lost Nose: A Programmed Book” turned up in Ulysses, Museum Street, with a £550 price tag. The hand-made, illustrated volume was created circa 1969 as a present for his girlfriend Pamela, later Pamela Sladek. As editor of a planned book of previously uncollected Sladek fiction, I was boggled by this serendipity and

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

invested in a digital camera to record an item supposedly too fragile to photocopy.

Jane Yolen reminisces about “the very large and very hairy man at the back of a signing line in a bookstore in Grand Rapids who said to me, ‘I am your biggest fan.’ (He was.) ‘Would you like to know how big?’ (I nodded.) He pointed to the cover of *The Books of Great Alta* and then to the back of his shoulder. ‘Tattooed it on my back.’ My children are chagrined that I did not ask to see it. But he was very big. And very hairy. And perhaps very mad.”

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

New Year Nobs. Sf-related UK New Year Honours in 2001 went to Patrick Moore (knighted), Spike Milligan (honorary knighthood only, since he’s an Irish citizen) and Fay Weldon (CBE). The sf links include Moore’s 1957 critical volume *Science and Fiction* (“It seems that the golden age of the fanzines is passing, if, indeed, it has not already passed”), Milligan’s post-holocaust farce *The Bed-Sitting Room* (written with John Antrobus; filmed 1969) and Weldon’s rip-snorting space opera *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989).

As Others See Us. “So – 2001, eh? One of those Buzz Years, like 1984, that some rabble-rousing shyster once wrote a depressing book about, thereby sending that section of the population who are prone to believing that authors have a clue about anything into a decade-long funk.” (Julie Burchill, *Spectator*, 30 Dec.)

R.I.P. **Jason Robards Jr** (1922-2000), US actor, died in December aged 78. Sf fans remember his appearances in film versions of *A Boy and His Dog*

(1975) and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1983). **Ray Walston**, who played the title role in the 1963-66 TV sf sitcom *My Favorite Martian*, died on 1 January aged 86. He also won the Tony Award for playing the Devil in *Damn Yankees*, repeating the part in the 1958 film version.

Thog’s Sepoy Mutiny Masterclass.

“But they were all British. Once the gauntlet had been thrown down and the sky blazed with mutiny, regional differences faded, local dialects paled to insignificance before the enormity of the challenge by ‘faithless natives’ that welded them into a single bullet, which each of them bit with tenacity.” (Stanley Wolpert, *India*, University of California Press, 1991)

Publishers and Sinners. *GalaxyOnline* lost its publisher and fiction editor when Ben Bova and Rick Wilber resigned in November and December respectively, grumbling about “lack of financing.” Plans to buy *Amazing* (see *IZ* 161) collapsed; *GalaxyOnline* is now buying the original *Galaxy* magazine.

Pudding Regurgitated. Philip Pullman’s all-time favourite book has suffered in translation, reports our down-under correspondent *Yvonne Rousseau*: “Gloom and doom in Australia: there’s a film been made of *The Magic Pudding* – animating Norman Lindsay’s drawings rather unwatchably and adding characters and plot-lines thought likely to appeal to Americans (Bunyip Bluegum is looking for his parents – an evil wombat kidnaps and imprisons travellers...). As in telemovies of Jane Austen’s work, the original dialogue is also ‘improved’ – what boots it, then, to have John Cleese doing the voice for the Pudding? – and the result has been ‘novelized’.” Oh dear.

James White Award. The 2001 contest for best unpublished story by a new writer is open – details from 211 Black Horse Ave, Dublin 7, Ireland, or www.jameswhiteaward.com. Deadline 31 August.

Thog’s Masterclass. *Dept of Eyeballs in the Sky*. “A ceiling fan can be a blur, or you can try to hang onto one of the blades with your eyes and let it swing you around. This last is a queasy business, and I abandoned it after a half hour.” (William Browning Spencer, “Pep Talk” in *The Return of Count Electric and Other Stories*, 1993) “Her knees grope along the floorboards of the pew, slight pressure as the cushions give, spreading out, buckling upward. As do her eyes.” (Charles Laird Calia, *The Unspeakable*, 1998).



REVIEWED

Implausibilities

Chris Gilmore

The Epic of Gilgamesh is among the oldest of human documents, based on events two millennia gone when Homer composed the *Iliad*. To use it as the basis for either a fantasy or an historical novel for the modern reader is thus no small task, since we can have very little empathy with how the Sumerians perceived their gods in relation to themselves beyond the trite conclusion that as their gods had progressed somewhat beyond the primeval animistic stage, but had yet to become the personifications of abstract qualities with which the modern mind is more familiar, we may reasonably assume that they drew no clear distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Stephan Grundy, in *Gilgamesh* (William Morrow, \$26) has attempted to retell the epic as an historical novel, with very little fantasy beyond the odd prophetic dream until two thirds through, when we meet the first supernatural monster; but elements of what must have been a far more animistic original keep seeping in.

Specifically, Grundy's line is that for the Sumerians there was no real distinction between metaphor and allegory. Thus, though the drought that afflicts Sumer, and is of the sort from which the pre-classical Greeks would have concluded that "the King must die," is referred to metaphorically as "the Bull of Heaven," no one is all that surprised when it is suddenly personified as a literal bull – one of preternatural force and ferocity, but nonetheless flesh and blood. This Gilgamesh and Enkidu demonstrate when, in a crucial passage, they accept its challenge, kill it and butcher it. That lifts the drought, but not the anger of the gods; the King

must still die, but in another persona, and by other means.

This sense of direct participation in the supernatural world is wholly at odds with modern perceptions (though I wonder what Blake would have made of it). It certainly reads oddly beside what we would call the geopolitical situation, which is stark. After a long minority, Gilgamesh has succeeded his father as Ensi of Erech. Erech is a major city of Mesopotamia, but subject to Agga of Kish to whom it pays vassal tribute. Being an energetic young man he sets about strengthening his domain – specifically, by conquering and exacting tribute from a number of lesser cities. Agga, naturally, demands his cut, both on general principles and to prevent Erech waxing strong enough to threaten Kish. Gilgamesh therefore

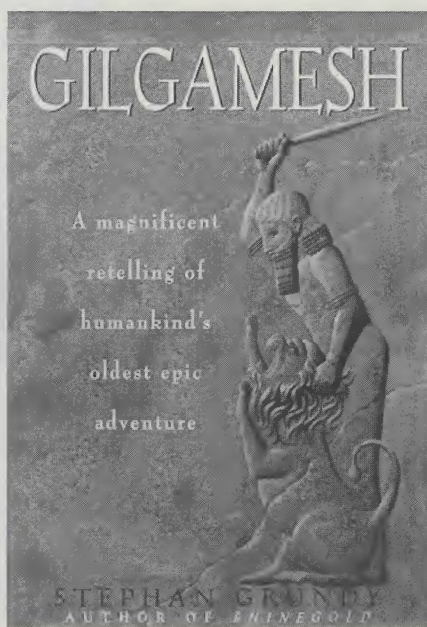
has two choices: throw off the yoke, and resist Agga's efforts to re-impose it; or submit, and see his city bled white. As there are rational arguments for both strategies, he makes a number of enemies by selecting the former, the more as his peasant subjects would far rather tend their crops and cattle than divide their time between training for war and building for siege.

So much for the background. The foreground is dominated by the love of Gilgamesh for Enkidu, a wild man who has passed his entire life Mowgli-style among lions. Enkidu provides the book's first great implausibility. He is full-grown yet speechless when he first appears, but no matter; a few weeks in the company of the Shamhatu (chief priestess of Inanna [Ishtar]) has him delivering pithy comments and sonorous orations in the style befitting a hero. Sorry, I know too much about beast-children to buy this for an instant.

I have other problems with the sexual relationship. Granted, Gilgamesh has three wives, and has been exercising *droit de seigneur* since he completed puberty, so he may be sated with women; but straight sex-scenes are difficult enough, even when both parties are lissome and witty. A gay sex scene, when both are (by Grundy's description) built like serious contenders for World's Strongest Man and notably solemn, can hardly be other than risible; nor is the situation helped by Grundy's unseemly injections of the lachrymose. There are occasions when it is no disgrace for a strong man to cry, but Gilgamesh's tears of mortification over his fear that Enkidu may (perhaps) love his newly-acquired pet lion more than himself would be excessive for Noddy and Big Ears.

His deathbed scenes, when Enkidu is cursed by the gods (or comes down with Guillain-Barré syndrome) work better; but even so Gilgamesh's mourning seems excessive. A man in his position should discharge his duties despite his grief, not neglect them because of it. A failure therefore; it may be that the material is simply intractable by modern man, but Grundy did himself no favours by concentrating so heavily on the many episodes from which his hero emerges without dignity.

As I grow older and grumpier, I find myself condemning more and more books as "self-indulgent." Perhaps it's just me, but my own theory is that the least durable of the baby-boomers are beginning to die off, while Generation X is now taking up the pen. Either way, *The Bridge* by Janine Ellen Young (Earthlight, £6.99) is an extremely ambitious work, marred by self-indulgence on





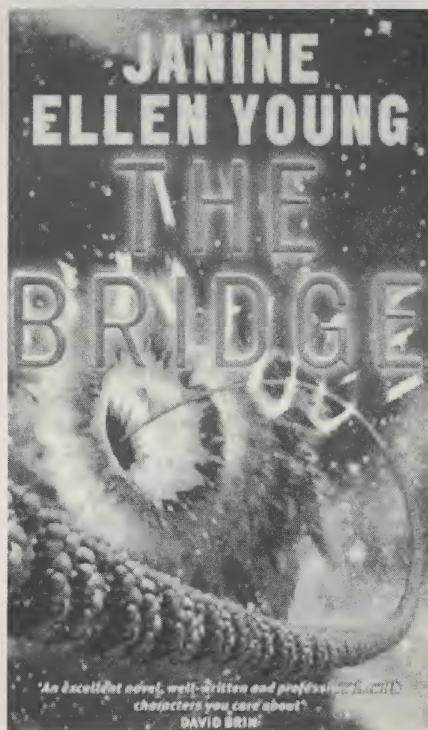
the part of the characters no less than the writer, and a pretentiously over-extended symbol in which paper boats carry candles down a benighted river.

The plot is a curious hybrid of broad-screen sf, the 1950s disaster novel, and the more pretentious sort of US soap. An alien race many light-years from here has perfected many of the sciences of which we can only wistfully dream, including the construction of Star Gates, which are what they sound like. Only snag is, such gates can only operate in pairs – you need one at each end, and ftl travel by any other means is impossible. What to do? Well, you despatch many consignments of specially tailored viruses to many distant, planet-bearing stars – such as our own. Once there they will enter the bodies of the local intelligent life-forms, and download into them both the theoretical physics needed to build Star Gates, and personal memories of the senders – to reassure them that there are Good Guys at the other end.

If this seems a cumbersome way of doing what a Von Neumann machine would do a lot better, and rather a lot to load onto a virus which has no experience of terrestrial DNA, you're right – and the aliens have got it a teeny bit wrong. The virus downloads the information OK, but also inflicts those infected (90% of the population) with something strongly resembling the Spanish Influenza of 1918, only much, much worse. Something over two-thirds die of it, but hey! Wasn't the Black Death crucial in sparking off the Renaissance? And weren't there loads too many people anyway?

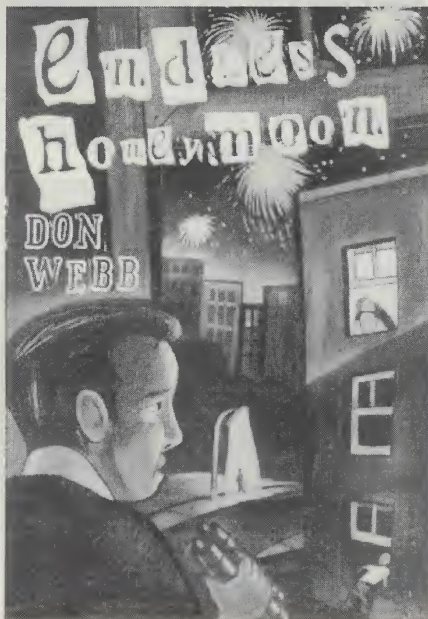
The remainder of the book is devoted to the wheeling and dealing of sundry high-flyers who want/don't want the Bridge (as they call the home-grown Star Gate) to be built. Realistically, given the predicates, the book features many monstrously ego-centric people, but Young seems totally unaware of the monstrosity. To take an early example, a young woman has survived the plague and brought to term a slightly premature but quite viable baby – unlike all her pregnant contemporaries, who either died or miscarried. What does she do? Why, she hangs herself – what else? Her husband died of the plague, you see, and she wants to join him. As for the kid – her boyfriend will be home before it starves or freezes, and he'll understand.

One can imagine Dostoevsky bringing off such a scene as an emblem of self-indulgence, but for Young it's an emblem of love – and that, far more than the scientific absurdities, is what's wrong with the book. Young has a good eye for visual detail and a good ear for internal monologue, but her characters and their interactions



are on a par with her science. I wonder how much more Generation X literature we'll be meeting – can this truly be the long-heralded Death of the Novel? I surely hope not – but roll on Generation Y!

Crime fiction covers a wide spectrum. At the lightest end are those books (dating back to *The Saint* and *Raffles*) in which attractive criminals commit outrages which are either "victimless" or only victimize the bad guys; at the darkest, ill-rewarded detectives strive to track down serial killers while battling with their own domestic problems, moral weaknesses and spiritual angst. In between you get books ranging from *Moll Flanders* to *The Anderson Tapes* where the



crime is largely incidental to considerations of character and social commentary. Don Webb's *Endless Honeymoon* (St Martin's Press, \$23.95) combines the three.

Willis and Virginia are an attractive married couple with an unusual hobby. Using a computer program, they track down people who (usually by perfectly legal means) cause grief to their neighbours and proceed to humiliate them with cruel but not life-threatening practical jokes. Unknown to them, someone else is using a more sophisticated version of the same program, but with more serious intent. He plays no games, but drills them at short range with a .22. Inevitably, one night they target the same snurge – but the gunman gets there first.

Meanwhile, the FBI is after the Shit-Killer (as he's known) but have no idea of who he is or where he will strike next. As agents assigned to him tend to go mad and have to be invalidated out, the assignment is known throughout the Bureau as a sign of extreme disfavour. At present the current agent still has dreams of making his name by cracking the case, while his deranged immediate predecessor is following another agenda entirely, involving yet a third layer of mystification and manipulation (and a faint shred of sfnal content to justify a review here) into which everyone eventually gets drawn.

The result is great fun, though with the best will in the world, highly implausible at every level. Heavy suspension of disbelief is called for, but it's worth the effort.

Reviewing two earlier books by Dan Weiss in *Interzone* 131, I made hay with the "mountain of editorial incompetence" displayed therein. I'm pleased to report that with *Sewerelf* (Black Plankton, \$9.95) that mountain has been reduced from Himalayan to Alpine proportions, though the grammar is still very lax and the paragraphing and punctuation haphazard in the extreme.

The story is set some years after the events of *Diplodiners*, though there's little continuity between books – or within this one, for that matter, it being an uneasy hybrid between two very traditional forms. The background is a satire on developed capitalism reminiscent of *The Space Merchants*, though with a far broader canvas. Mankind, having ventured into the galaxy, finds it dominated throughout by shysters and robber-barons – nor is any other paradigm on offer. The central character, Asher Archer, a loyal company hack with a wife who hates him, finds himself kidnapped by a rival company and required to hack it at a lower level, such being the prevailing ethic. The

principal conflict (never resolved) concerns the question of what to do with a newly-discovered race of primitive sapients. The only options anyone takes seriously are: a) as they make excellent hamburgers, pretend they're mere animals and set about intensive animal husbandry; b) as they have affectionate and responsive natures, breed them intensively and market them as pets.

Every piece of writing is haunted – as is every choice we make, every brain cell we gamble in our pursuit of a good time – but no ghost worth the name is for *everyone* to see, and manifestations go largely unnoticed. The writer, however, sees them clearly. The writer of the book views the project's *potentia* with any mixture of emotions, and is able to see the faces and hear the voices of the book it will never be. And sometimes, particularly if an earlier interest has been awakened, a reader will hear murmurs too.

Just where does Simon Ings's novel, *Painkillers* (Bloomsbury, £9.99), go wrong? Or should the question be why? Either way, the hollow sensation of a pulverized promise is present, not quite from the beginning – at which point we are introduced to a typically Ingsian male first person narrator, indulging himself in a spot of eroto-acupuncture in Hong Kong – but shortly afterward. We feel let down. Not let down (not at all) by the realization that Ings has left behind the warped-worldview post-cyberpunk writing in order to concentrate on a fairly so-so thriller; but let down, I guess, by the notion that his work has become as anaesthetized and pain-insensitive as the title (at a push) might suggest. What made Ings's earlier work so successful (discounting, perhaps, the strange second novel, *City of the Iron Fish*) was the sense of pain implicit. Explicit, too. Understanding that a good character must be abandoned up the creek, not only minus a paddle, but without a canoe half the time, Simon Ings produced work that had the reader caring for the viewpoint character.

And here this simply fails to happen. Try as I did to sympathize, to be engaged, I stopped caring about Adam's odyssey early on. He's a man with more than his fair share of problems – a curdling marriage, an autistic son, a drink dependency, a series of business problems – but despite the gradient of the shite-mound he must scale, he seems to have things too easy. As he puts it himself at one point: "Anything more ordinary, more human, would have probably finished me off." He is referring to the needle-point treatment that he pays for in the Far East. "They clipped fine plastic-sheathed wires to the needles they

The foreground concerns Asher's relationship with the elf of the title (whom he met, for reasons I won't go into, in a sewer). She combines the appearance of an exotically pretty teenager with the habits (as it transpires) of C. L. Moore's Shambleau. The stories really have nothing to do with each other, but are thematically linked by the elf's acknowledgement that she could, if push came to shove,

survive on animal life-force – but she prefers not to, just as the humans could survive as Vegans, but prefer hamburger.

Altogether, a fun little item, but no more to be taken seriously than anything else this month; I just wish Weiss (whom I presume to operate Black Plankton as a one-man band) could get a proper publisher.

Chris Gilmore

Duality: Activate that Second Voice Now!

David Mathew

had buried in your stomach, pubis, thighs, and plugged the wires into a box by the side of the bed... Sooner or later, she would turn that dial." Fine: so he likes a bit of the old rough stuff. But what about his wife – and what about the fact that it is hard to care much for *her* either? "Eva thought I was having an affair... In the day, alone with her imagination, Eva wept. In the evening, when we went out, fashion shades hid the pinkness of her eyes... She did what she could to keep

me solely hers. She went through my pockets while I was in the shower... She dressed up for me. Gucci. Donna Karan. Alexander McQueen."

As Bruce Springsteen once said, "A life of leisure and a pirate's treasure/ Don't make much for tragedy." Maybe this is the spoiling factor here as well. Over-rich, drink-sodden, feckless and unpangable (he deals with the massacre of their dog, later on, as though he were choosing which brand of deodorant to purchase), there is little life in Adam's eyes, and little – very little – winking away throughout the narrative. It is no great surprise when he is coerced into taking a place in a world of organized crime that threatens everything he comes to see as important in his life. But the reader's shrug is genuine; the gambits and predicaments of the main player have lost their bite.

None of which, of course, is to suggest that Ings has written an unqualified dud. Far too clever and cocky to waste time, he is present, undeniably so, in the flashpoints of brilliant prose, such as the remarkable sequence on autism (page 45). After all, it was not long since I was calling Ings's previous novel, *Headlong*, "nearly perfect", and I had to think long and hard as to whether my disappointment here was due to the shadow cast by the same. But I think not. "We're all born with a message inside our heads," Ings writes, "a piece of information so incredible, it has to be coded in our genes – because we'd never work it out on our own." Every book, we might venture, is born in the same way. A first sentence contains the book's DNA – it's a cell sample, a blueprint, or a crackable genetic code – and readers will build the book for themselves. With hindsight being such a wonderful thing, it was obvious, with *Headlong* (heavily influenced by the crime genre) that other fields were waiting; and why not? Whatever genre Simon Ings moves into next, I will read the book and hope for the absence of ghosts; I will yearn for a more realized piece of work.

Tom Holt is starting to grow on me. Were I now to go on to say something about it not being catching or that the doctor has given me some cream, or any other dumb punchline,





you might hear the distant cymbal-crash, but be assured, or warned, that such a lame pun fairly reflects the level of Holt's less ambitious efforts in *Valhalla* (Orbit, £15.99).

But I repeat, Tom Holt is starting to grow on me. After I'd read the previous novel, *Only Human*, I wrote to the effect that it was an interesting story, simply and briskly told, but that the humour did little for me personally. This I still stand by, but would amend the judgement slightly, now, with *Valhalla* in my sights. *Valhalla* is a very interesting story, simply told but energetically complex in its plotting, with a few good jokes (or examples of word-play) to complement and stand head and shoulders above the ranks of groaners, howlers, raised eyebrows and wary sneers. Whatever next? I found myself thinking; that literary unicorn – legitimately *comic fantasy*.

Our arena is the afterlife. We have an agent for the gods, "a man who not only called bluffs but had a whole string of them chasing after him Pied Piper fashion with their tails wagging" (do we feel the ghost of Wodehouse here?), and a man who "didn't understand the meaning of the word defeat and, like most Americans, encountering a word he didn't understand just prompted him to talk louder." His more amusing comments will probably die on their backsides here, but trust me, in context, they work. Imagine the vilest of vile agents (for plenty of people reading this, I am certain this will require no great stretch) and hear that person utter comments such as: "If I were you, I'd start measuring Europe for new curtains, because when this deal goes through you're gonna be able to buy it out of petty cash."

Said agent wishes to know more about his daughter, who has died and gone to Valhalla to be a headstrong waitress with ideas of improving the look of the food hall. ("Loudly to be out crying," says a Viking at one point.) This woman's name is Carol, and she has her work cut out for her when it comes to unruly dead Vikings. "Carol scowled away the feeble attempt at humour," we read – and we know the feeling! Also present is Attila the Hun... as a baby, scared of everything; and a one-time player of *Dungeons & Dragons*-style games about the gods, but who is now, and will be forever more, in the presence of one: Odin. This player of games is told: "If you ask me, keeping me hanging around in this dimension when all the other pagan gods have long since fallen into disuse and gone off to run bars in the Algarve or start their own production companies strikes me as ill-mannered, to say the least." Let that be a lesson to anyone who runs around shopping centres and fields re-enacting battles!

In the afterlife you will pay your price...

My favourite surprise of the month was *Hush* (RazorBlade Press, £8.99) by Tim Lebbon and Gavin Williams. Disregard the advertising sales pitch at the end (always annoying) and try to concentrate on the teeny-weeny print and the paragraph, shall we say, idiosyncrasies (poor alignment, unnecessary gaps, etc.) and we have here an excellent debut package. Like Ings, above, Lebbon and Williams have spared their decreasingly vile protagonist no sleepless nights. As part of a group of animal-rights activists, the anti-hero, complete with the burden of a synaptic short-cut that takes him from equable geniality to full-on pathological displays of violence within *seconds*, breaks into a lab to discover that worse than customary animal experimentation is taking place. For one thing, in one cage is a teenage girl.

Lives are lost and a plot unravels with delicious sloth. For a while it is the activist (on whom the experimenters have plenty of dossiers and information) and his ex, against the world. In a diary details of an attack on a village are found – "Dismantled. Dismembered. Very, very carefully trimmed, sliced into neat, bloodless pieces and then rearranged into all manner of unnatural patterns. The whole village. Every single occupant of that doomed place" – and it becomes perfectly clear that this is more than a bit of rough and tumble with the powers that be. "What if this is a full-scale war with something from *outside*?"

A little more work, I feel, was required during the editing process. The only real problem with *some* of

the writing is that it's boiling too quickly, and some radical revisions might have been made. For example, I cannot be the only reader who fails to appreciate paragraph-long explanations of bodily functions. Nor the only reader who suspects that this kind of thing – "Trev snorting blood, spitting great globs of the gory stuff onto the floor of the van, his nose a split plum which should have been stitched... Sondra sitting up front, gnawing so hard on absent fingernails that blood trickled down her chin" – is somewhat heavy-handed. (Is the latter sentence even *possible*?) On the other hand, there are lines which smell of the lamp, it cannot be denied, but sound great nevertheless: "Her hand fell away. She looked sad and weary. 'You're all revolt, Jake. You're a scream made of skin.'"

RazorBlade Press is one of the few British publishing outfits still dedicating itself to the promotion of good horror fiction. It has my support – as does this novel.

Briefly, two paragraphs for a book that deserves a lot more attention. The title is *Look to Windward* (Orbit, £16.99) and the writer is Iain M. Banks. And the summing-up adjective might be "fantastic." Of course, Banks is a writer whose two voices are part of the packaging deal... or the sales set-up, the gimmick. The presence of duality, in this context, has little to do with reader disappointment, although it might be worth mentioning that I am one of the few people on the planet, it seems, who was not bowled away by *The Wasp Factory*. Nor do I rate *Canal Dreams* very highly, and *A Song of Stone* (reviewed in these pages three years ago) only got better after a fortnight of stodgy preamble.

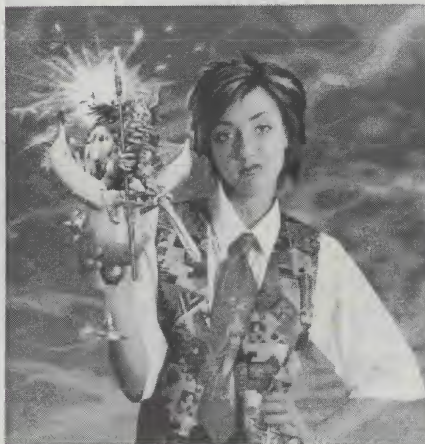
Ah, but those are books by Iain Banks, not Iain M. Banks, where the middle initial is used *specifically* for sf work. What of the Culture novels – the series of books that take place in the mesmerically-described locations in the author's head? Reader, I haven't read them: this is my confession. Dipping in and out of various titles had not given me much to go on, and *Look to Windward* arrived as a fantastic assault on my senses, but was described so well that I felt I had been vacationing in the Culture Orbital for all of my adult life. Every sight, done just so; every dialogue, witty and cold by turns. A story of a reclusive composer and the visitor he doesn't want, and the gameplan not even known by the visitor: it is scintillating, absorbing work; and recommended.

David Mathew

'Dazzling' Time Out

TOM HOLT

VALHALLA





Chivers Press have released part two of Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy, *The Subtle Knife*, as a Cavalcade Story Cassette. As with its predecessor, *Northern Lights* (see review, issue 153), the narrative is read by Philip Pullman himself, while the dialogue is performed by a cast of 27 actors, including the likes of Julian Glover. Several actors return to reprise their roles from the first book, so we're treated to a second helping of Alison Dowling as Mrs Coulter, Garrick Hagon as Lee Scorsby, and Joanna Wyatt as Lyra – about whom I have no complaints of tweeness this time. In fact my only real complaint is with Kate Lock's horribly wrong portrayal of Mary Malone. On the other hand, Steven Webb is most satisfying as Will, the timid twelve-year-old who is forced by circumstances to behave as an adult.

For those unfamiliar with the story, it's vivid, exciting, rip-roaring stuff featuring zeppelin fights, deserted cities, gateways into other worlds, ruptured ecosystems, and much heroism. It also has a vein of hard science, touching on (among other things) modern cosmology, and a powerful underlying seriousness bordering on bleakness – not the sort of thing you might expect from something that's usually found in the children's section of the bookshop, but Pullman is not one to underestimate his audience.

It's always interesting to hear an author read his own work, and it's a bonus if he's any good at it. Philip Pullman is superb, and his heart is in it. Listening to the tapes is not a substitute for reading the books, it's a heightening of the pleasure, and once again I recommend them to seasoned readers and newcomers alike. Chivers have put together another excellent package; here's hoping they think about giving Pullman's "Sally Lockhart" books the same treatment.

The Subtle Knife (8 cassettes, 8 hrs 55 mins, £24.99) is available from Chivers Press Limited, Windsor Bridge Road, Bath BA2 3AX (tel. 01225 335336; fax 01225 310771).

When I heard that *2001: A Space Odyssey* was being released as part of the BBC Radio Collection, I was under the impression that it was going to be a dramatization, not least because of the involvement of Dirk Maggs of *Gemini Apes* and *Voyage* fame. It sounded intriguing; I've heard of people doing audio versions of silent movies, so why not *2001*?

As it turned out, the tape is simply a straight, abridged reading of Clarke's tie-in novel, competently read by William Roberts. It also has a (slightly) updated introduction read by the author himself, some token sound

effects, and a naggingly familiar tune at the beginning. An enjoyable enough revisit for those of us whose discovery of sf began with Sir Arthur, but I'm not sure how useful it is to anyone else, what with book and film being readily available. On the other hand, it might be the ideal gift for the non-sf reader who enjoyed the film but hadn't a clue what it was all about.

Meanwhile, if anyone is thinking of reworking *2001* as an audio play, I'd be delighted to review it.

2001: A Space Odyssey (2 cassettes, 3 hrs, £8.99) is available from BBC Worldwide.

What the world really needs is more independent audio producers. And while BBV is not independent in every sense – their "Audio Adventures in Time and Space" range are set firmly within the Doctor Who universe – there's a rough-edged enthusiasm about their projects that you don't tend to find with some of the more "polished" audio plays; they also have that sense of adventure that is so often absent from the Big Finish *Doctor Who* productions (see below).

BBV are prolific – Gareth Preston's *Conduct Unbecoming* is the 27th play in the range. It opens with a lot of shooting and dying gasps as the militaristic potato-heads known as the

Sontarans overrun a colony world. They soon incarcerate the planet's spineless president and his rather more resourceful secretary Maria, hoping to extract vital secrets from them. But until that happens, there's always the possibility that Maria will talk herself out of danger, given that her Sontaran captor is intrigued by some of her ideas.

The play's success is largely due to the fact that the drama is in the dialogue. On the other hand, Pip and Jane Baker's *The Rani Reaps the Whirlwind* employs the seemingly obligatory characters-describing-what-they-see approach, which rarely sounds anything other than contrived. Here, it doesn't seem to matter quite as much, as *Whirlwind* is strictly an audio comic-book adventure, if that's not too much of a contradiction. It's a lot more fun than the same authors' dreadful Doctor Who TV story, *Time and the Rani*, which it immediately follows. Kate O'Mara's Rani is an ambiguous character, and is therefore a much more interesting villain than, say, the Master. From the way the play ends, I would suspect she's planning on returning for a series of adventures, along with a couple of supporting cast members.

I do wish audio producers would stop giving their aliens such silly voices, though.

Both plays are available as single one-hour CDs, £11.50 each from BBV Distribution, 3 Douglas Crescent, Bitterne, Southampton SO19 5JP.

Meanwhile, this review column will no longer be featuring the "official" *Doctor Who* plays from Big Finish. Producer Jason Haigh-Ellery explained that it was not good business sense to send review copies to a magazine if they don't result in sales. This may be for the best, but I am sorry I won't be reviewing their other ranges – Bernice Summerfield, Iris Wildthyme, and the intriguing-sounding "official" prequel to James Follett's *Earthsearch*. If this has piqued your interest, contact them on bigfinish@easynet.co.uk, or at Big Finish Productions Ltd, PO Box 1127, Maidenhead, Berks SL6 3LN (tel. 01628 828283 fax 01628 828313). And be sure and tell them I sent you!

There's just space to mention that Stephen Gallagher kindly sent me off-air recordings of some of his early radio work. Of particular interest is *An Alternative to Suicide*, an involving story concerning a deep space vessel called *The Iron Star*, the Earth-based company that launched it, and their little-better-than-slaves employees. This play would sit very neatly in the BBC Radio Collection, assuming they still have the master tapes.

Paul Beardsley



James P. Blaylock's short fiction includes some of the most individual fantasies of the last couple of decades. They allow us to enter, fleetingly, some very strange worlds which are, at the same time, very personalized. *Thirteen Phantasms* (Edge-wood Press, \$25) represents the cream of over 20 years' worth of his *oeuvre*.

The title story is sf nostalgia. The US postal service acts somehow as a time machine for a man who has become preoccupied by a vanished era he only knows through reading old sf magazines. The story won a World Fantasy Award in 1997, which is possibly why it was chosen to be the title piece. It is well written and ingenious, but perhaps its effect would be muted on someone unfamiliar with sf's past.

A rather different kind of nostalgia permeates Blaylock's earlier Steam-punk stories. The ones in this volume have several characters in common, but centre around a Professor Langdon St Ives. "The Ape-Box Affair" (1978) describes an apparent visitation from another world in an alternative Victorian London. The tale is essentially farce. The weakest of these stories is probably "Two Views of a Cave Painting," a comic time-travel yarn which is a homage to Wells in both plot and style. It suffers because of occasional factual glitches (Megatheria fossils in England?) and lapses in historical research, which puncture the illusion that we are reading a manuscript from the early 20th century, even an alternative one. The third of these stories, "The Idol's Eye" (1988), pastiches with moderate effectiveness the fantasy-adventure romps from the pulps of the 1920s and 1930s.

Blaylock's stronger work often allows us glimpses of fantastic worlds through an eccentric, individual point of view. This may be more-or-less literally, as in "Nets of Silver and Gold" (1985). It's set in a beautifully depicted St Malo and concerns visions observed through a keyhole. The visions are described second-hand, via a friend of the protagonist: we are unsure of their reality until late in the narrative.

A more internal alternative reality is presented in "A Better Boy." This is a charming character piece concerning an inventor, Bernard Wilkins, at war with "tomato worms," a war which seems almost minor compared with the other mishaps of his

Individualities

Matt Colborn

life. Cod science mixes with trouser loss and a wonderful domestic pragmatism displayed by both Wilkins and his wife. If you want to know what a "Samoa ether bunny" is, read this story!

Blaylock's worlds seem so real because he is able to combine realistic detail with subtly drawn fantasy. This is an important attribute for a writer of supernatural horror, and indeed, several of Blaylock's stories are very dark. "The Shadow on the Doorstep" is a watery mood piece. The narrator recalls visits to rather elusive fish shops, staffed by slightly Lovecraftian shopkeepers, the aquaria repositories of barely recognizable animals. Rather less understated is the "Old Curiosity Shop" (1998), where personal effects are seen as storehouses for crushing emotions.

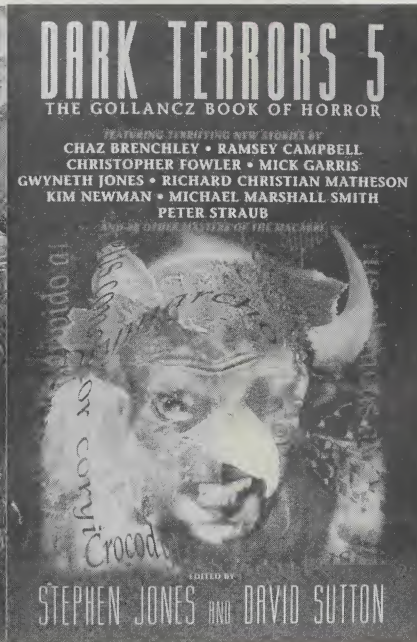
"Paper Dragons" (1986), probably the best exemplar of Blaylock's fantasy here, is not horror. Any unease whilst reading it, however, springs from a transformation of the familiar which is common to much supernatural horror fiction. Another World Fantasy Award winner, it describes a world which in many ways is very ordinary, but which contains artificers who shape metals, wood and biological material into strange new beings. The effect is less genetic engineering, and more a world of thaumaturgy: the mind is the artificer here. The narrator's imaginary cloud-creatures vie for our wonder with the more "real" hermit crabs and unicorns, and dragons. And, of course, the "master magician," Silver, spends most of his time off-stage. Deservedly an award-winner.

Dark Terrors 5: The Gollancz Book of Horror edited by Steven Jones and David Sutton (Gollancz, £17.99) is a confluence of many current themes in horror – and indeed of fantastic fiction. The best stories embody personal tragedy, often expressed by supernatural means. The preference is away from the visceral.

An exception to this is David Case's "Pelican Cay." This was written back in the 1980s. It is a fairly straightforward story of science gone awry, with the victims of a contagious, chemical "disease" running out of control on a small island off the Florida Keys. A journalist arrives at the island to interview a scientist who is having second thoughts about his work at a secret military installation. The emphasis on "body-horror," big government corruption and, of course, a contagion that spreads through blood, anchor the story firmly in the 1980s. It's not the strongest of the collection by any means. Case is a competent

storyteller, but his lapses into philosophy are awkward. That said, the story works, and is in places disturbing. It also contrasts with the more contemporary concerns of most of the rest of the collection.

Perhaps the foremost of these for many fiction readers is the future of the book. The horror in Ramsey Campbell's "No Story in It," is illiteracy. Sometime in the not-too-distant future, an ageing writer attempts to get his books republished so that he can financially support his daughter, her husband and his granddaughter. He gradually discovers



that publishing is not as it was. Cassandra Books turns out to be a shoddy and threadbare organization with a minimal clientele.

Meanwhile, the television blares headlines all day long. This all-too-plausible scenario is in some respects the most chilling story of the collection! Nevertheless, we have to ask ourselves whether the story succeeds as a piece of art. Ramsey Campbell is a fine author, but in many ways this is a piece of fiction that is hard to go beyond. The very title, "No Story in It," dwells upon the end of written fiction as an art form. There can be no more stories after this one. And it is this possibility which must overshadow the rest of the collection.

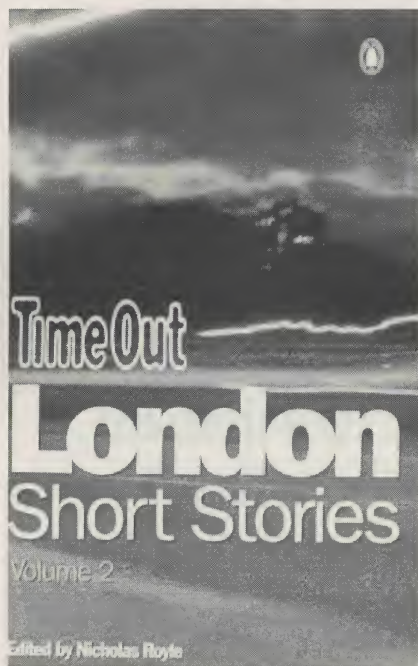
It has been noted by some that an increasing amount of contemporary written fiction tries to imitate the visual media. Whether this is the result of the trends dealt with by Campbell, or the rise of postmodernism, it is hard to say. Kim Newman's amusing "Going to Series," about a diabolical version of Channel 4's *Big Brother*, reflects this trend in both style and theme. The story is told as a series of conference and interview transcripts and communiqués. One was left wondering how long it would be before something like *It's a Madhouse!* airs for real.

Some of the finest stories of the anthology are those that deal directly with more personal problems. One of the best is a dark fantasy by Mary A. Turzillo called "Bottle Babies." This concerns *extremely* overprotective parents and a benevolent supernatural force (the fairies) who collude with a little girl to set her and her brother free. It manages to be lyrical and amusing while at the same time deeply disturbing. This is largely achieved by having the story told through the eyes of the little girl.

Also memorable is Tanith Lee's "The Abortionist's Horse." Lee sets the story in an almost rural idyll which masks necessary brutalities. These are primarily symbolized by the ghost of a lesbian abortionist who is imagined to ride past the protagonist's house at night. As usual, Lee's writing is first-rate and very beautiful, but the story is also unflinchingly brutal.

Other stories of note include Gwyneth Jones's "Destroyer of Worlds," about the agonies of a mother following the loss of her child, and Melanie Tem's "Alicia," a scary and humorous look at the pitfalls of adolescence. Less effective is Brian Stableford's "The Haunted Bookshop," notable for a guest appearance by Lionel Fanthorpe, the host of the infamous *Fortean TV* and a once-prolific author of pulp fantasy tales. It's quite amusing, but the central idea is not really developed very much.

Lisa Tuttle's "Haunts" is about the



devastating effect an obsession has on a group of friends. Some contemporary psychic research also features in the form of an acoustic explanation of ghosts. The story is less intellectual than Stableford's but more satisfying. The "explanations" we are given for the supernatural really say more about the people evoking the explanations than about the phenomena themselves.

Finally, Christopher Fowler gives us an understated serial-killer piece entitled "At Home in the Pubs of Old London." The title describes the story pretty neatly: it's mainly a description of the very truncated "relationships" the narrator has in many of London's public houses. The story works because we get a strong sense of why the killer likes his haunts so much: the different pubs, in fact, are rather more three-dimensional than his victims.

On the whole, a fine collection of contemporary horror, although a couple of the pieces do seem to have been chosen more for their Big Name value than the story's quality. This would only be a problem, however, if there weren't a backbone of top-rate stories here. Roll on the next volume.

Christopher Fowler's contribution to *Dark Terrors 5* could almost have been written for the third collection in this review, *The Time Out Book of London Short Stories, Volume 2* edited by Nicholas Royle (Penguin, £7.99). The story he did write for it, "Rainy Day Boys," is at once tragic, rather depressing, and very funny. Both the main characters are in their early 30s, "mentally ossifying" in London. The narrative is set against the soulless background of contemporary London: a place of MacDonalds, playstations, Starbucks and child gangs. As in "At Home," Fowler real-

izes his London well.

The two central characters are rather unsympathetic, and this dilutes the grisly comedy, which is otherwise very funny. An old hippy is accidentally "killed" with a nail. We have the distinct impression that neither of the characters care very much: they seem more concerned with mutual character assassination. But this is possibly deliberate.

Michael Moorcock's London, described in "London Blood," is rather more ponderous and Dickensian. There's much here that reminds one of the city of his novel *Mother London*. She is the "last of the city states." Moorcock's London, too, is a place of family, a contrast from the population of alienated individuals Fowler presents. But this is a London that's receding.

Both Kim Newman and Paul J. McAuley's Londons are, in contrast, places that never were. Newman's story, "The Man on the Clapham Omnibus," is a Moorcockian view of an alternative city ruled by Parliamentarians centuries after the Civil War (although, paradoxically, the royal family still exists: Diana's a saint). The story is entertaining, but the world's a bit of a (postmodern) mess. Finally, McAuley's contribution recasts London as an entropic landscape, where personal relationships are decaying at the rate of the metal. Also containing tales by Maureen Freely, Esther Freud, Christopher Kenworthy, Toby Litt, Geoff Nicholson, Chris Petit, Michèle Roberts, Iain Sinclair, Conrad Williams and others, this is an anthology well worth looking into.

Also Noted:

Matthew Fitt's *But n Ben A-Go-Go* (Luath Press, £10.99) is a cyberpunk novel set in 2090, in a Scotland which has been inundated by the sea. Most of the inundated cities have been replaced by a floating conurbation known as the Port. There's a very contagious AIDS-like disease, spread through sexual contact, called Senga.

There are several strengths: the characterization is better than many novels in the cyberpunk sub-genre, and the world at times interesting and humorous. However, considering the accompanying blurb, it's hard to see what's ground-breaking about this novel, aside from the fact it's written entirely in spoken Scots. The envisaged future consists of several familiar cyberpunk tropes strung together. The protagonist's a policeman and there are regular asides in cyberspace where cheeky AIs rule. Even the notions of an inundated Scotland and a souped-up AIDS are hardly original. That said, this is a worthy first novel, interesting enough to lift it well above the average.

Matt Colborn

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Ashley, Mike. **The Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines From the Beginning to 1950. The History of the Science-Fiction Magazine, Volume I.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-865-0, xi+300pp, C-format paperback, cover by Leo Morey, £12.95. (History of sf magazines, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £32 [not seen]; the first of a three-volume series, it's a heavily revised, vastly expanded version of the introductions and appendices to Ashley's four-volume anthology series, *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine* [published by New English Library, 1974-1978]; although this comes from a university press, Ashley is no academic and writes in a popular style [but he is a scrupulous bibliographer and cites his sources – unlike, say, the late Sam Moskowitz]; it's a sprightly, detailed run-through of genre history, highly recommended for the ordinary sf reader who wants to know more about the development of the field; it should be an invaluable source-book for academics too.) *Late entry: 12th December 2000 publication, received in January 2001.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Deep Future.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07195-8, 215pp, hardcover, £18. (Speculative non-fiction collection, first edition; this lively gathering of Baxter's popular-science and future-studies essays, revised from appearances in *Astronomy Now*, *Focus*, *Foundation*, *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, *New Scientist*, *Spaceflight* and other periodicals, bears a remarkable resemblance [on the face of it, at least] to Arthur C. Clarke's classic book *Profiles of the Future* [1962]; recommended.) *25th January 2001.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Manifold: Space.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-43077-8, 453pp, hardcover, \$24. (Sf novel, first published in the UK as *Space: Manifold 2*, 2000; parts first appeared as separate stories in the now-defunct U.S. magazine *Science Fiction Age*, and in Peter Crowther's 1999 anthology *Moonshots*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 162.) *30th January 2001.*

Bova, Ben. **Jupiter.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-76765-0, xii+433pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; having done the Moon, Mars and Venus, Bova moves on to the solar system's largest planet; it scarcely seems five minutes since the Hodder & Stoughton hardcover of this book came out – well, it was on 16th November 2000, actually.) *15th February 2001.*

Bova, Ben. **The Precipice: The Asteroid Wars, I.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-76960-2, 439pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; having done the Moon, Mars, Venus and Jupiter, Bova moves on to the Asteroids; and this book comes less than three months after his previous one [see above].) *1st February 2001.*

Brake, Colin. **Escape Velocity.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53825-2, 251pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor; this is a debut novel by an ex-BBC script editor.) *5th February 2001.*

Britton, David. **Baptised in the Blood of Millions.** "A Novel of Fucking Holocaust Terror." Edited by Michael Butterworth. Savoy [446 Wilmslow Rd., Withington, Manchester M20 3BW], ISBN 0-86130-101-3, 244pp, hardcover, cover by John Coulthart, £20. (Horror novel, first edition; the author of the banned-but-praised *Lord Horror* [1989] and its follow-up, *Motherfuckers: The Auschwitz of Oz* [1996], has now produced a third volume – with his usual collaborator, Butterworth – which no doubt will be equally outrageous; as usual, the cast list includes the traitorous Lord Haw-Haw and '30s film star Jessie Matthews, this time joined by "poetess Sylvia Plath" among others; depending on your point of view, it's either a dreadful heap of obscene old trash... or weird, dark, appallingly funny underground literature as only Savoy can do it.) *15th February 2001.*

Butler, Andrew M. **The Pocket Essential Cyberpunk.** "Pocket Essentials Literature." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-28-5, 96pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Reading guide to cyberpunk [and "post-cyberpunk"] sf; first edition; in over 30,000 words of text, it presents a remarkably clear and level-headed discussion of its topic, and includes brief but pertinent readings of authors such as Gibson, Sterling, Pat Cadigan, Neal Stephenson, Gwyneth Jones, Jeff Noon, Greg Egan, Tricia Sullivan and Jon Courtenay Grimwood; recommended; this is one of a commendable series of small but handily-designed 96-page books on aspects of cinema, literature, and popular culture in general; the series editor is Paul Duncan, who has also written the volumettes on Alfred Hitchcock, on Stanley Kubrick, on *Film Noir* and on *Noir Fiction*.) *Late entry: November [?] 2000 publication, received in January 2001.*

Butler, Andrew M. **The Pocket Essential Philip K. Dick.** "Pocket Essentials Literature." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-29-3, 96pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Reading guide to the sf, non-fiction and films of Philip K. Dick; first edition; by the same author as *Cyberpunk* [above], and published simultaneously, it's another lucid, well-knit, little guide – excellent value for the money.) *Late entry: November [?] 2000 publication, received in January 2001.*



BOOKS RECEIVED



JANUARY 2001

Card, Orson Scott. **Shadow of the Hegemon.** "Book Two of the Shadow Trilogy." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-037-7, 365pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; sequel to *Ender's Shadow* [1999], in the new trilogy of sequels to Card's greatest success, *Ender's Game* [1985].) *1st February 2001.*

Cornell, Paul, ed. **Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Dead Men Diaries.** Big Finish [PO Box 1127, Maidenhead SL6 3LW], ISBN 1-903654-00-9, 220pp, A-format paperback, cover by Carolyn Edwards, £6.99. (Shared-world sf anthology, first edition; contributors include Daniel O'Mahoney, Kate Orman and Dave Stone, among others; this seems to be an overture volume to a new paperback-original series picking up from where Virgin Publishing's "New Adventures" left off [for the first volume proper see below, under Justin Richards]; the character of Bernice Summerfield, a sort of female Indiana Jones, was created by Paul Cornell.) *Late entry: September 2000 publication, received in January 2001.*

Craig, Brian. **The Wine of Dreams.** "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-85154-123-0, 305pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; "Brian Craig" is a pseudonym of Brian Stableford; this is the first we have seen in a "third series" of Games Workshop paperback-original novels and anthologies; the first series was published from GW's then office in Brighton, 1988-1990; the second series was published by Bantam from London, under licence from GW, in the mid-1990s; this new series, published from Nottingham under the general editorship of Marc Gascoigne, has been running for about a year; the earlier titles include *Eye of Terror* by Barrington J. Bayley [2000], a "Warhammer 40,000 Novel"; see also the books listed below, under Marc Gascoigne and William King.) *Late entry: late (?) 2000 publication, received in January 2001.*

Davidson, Avram. **Everybody Has Somebody in Heaven: Essential Jewish Tales of the Spirit**. Edited by Jack Dann and Grania Davidson Davis. Devora Publishing [40 East 78th St., Suite 16D, New York, NY 10021, USA], ISBN 1-930143-10-9, 285pp, hardcover, cover by Avi Katz, \$24.95. (Fantasy/mainstream collection, first edition; it contains 20-odd stories and poems on fantastical Jewish themes by the late lamented Davidson [1923-1993], mostly previously uncollected and mostly reprinted from the periodicals *Jewish Life* and *Commentary*, plus a couple of chapters of an unfinished novel; there are also tributes to the author from Peter S. Beagle, Richard A. Lupoff, Barry N. Malzberg and others, plus an afterword, "A Biography of Avram Davidson: Water from a Deep Well," by Eileen Gunn; recommended to Davidson completists – and to anyone interested in Jewish fantasy writing.) *Late entry: October 2000 publication, received in January 2001.*

Day, Martin. **Bunker Soldiers**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53819-8, 282pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the First Doctor, Steven and Dodo – and the 13th-century Mongol hordes.) *5th February 2001.*

Gascoigne, Marc, and Andy Jones, eds. **Dark Imperium**. "Warhammer 40,000." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-136-2, 274pp, A-format paperback, cover by Wayne England, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff anthology, first edition; this is the third in a series of "Warhammer 40K" anthologies, set "in the war-torn 41st millennium" and selected "from the pages of *Inferno!* magazine"; the contributors include, among others, Barrington J. Bayley [two stories], Andy Chambers, Simon Jowett, William King and Gav Thorpe [two stories]; the *Inferno!* magazine referred to, straplined "Tales of Fantasy & Adventure," is a 68-page, perfect-bound, comic-book-sized bimonthly issued by Games Workshop and containing mainly fiction – and priced at [gulp] £5 per issue; the January-February 2001 issue is number 22.) *January (?) 2001.*

Gentle, Mary. **Ash: A Secret History**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-744-6, 1113pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; a very long book of some 450,000 words, this has to be Mary Gentle's *magnum opus* to date; reviewed, ravingly, by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 160.) *15th February 2001.*

Grimwood, Jon Courtenay. **Pashazade: The First Arabesk**. Earthlight, 0-743-20284-8, 326pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Grimwood's fifth novel, and the opener of a trilogy, it's set in an alternate world "where Germany won the First World War" and where "the Middle East is still dominated by the Ottoman Empire.") *May 2001.*

Harman, Andrew. **Talonspotting**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-013-X, ix+278pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; more "demonic" fun in the author's usual sub-Pratchett vein.) *1st February 2001.*

Hunter, Kim. **Knight's Dawn: Book One of the Red Pavilions**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-031-8, 374pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the publishers tell us nothing about the author, except to call him or her "an exciting new voice in fantasy fiction" – which is a sure sign, these days, that this is someone trying to relaunch their career under a pseudonym; the trouble is, the

name has not been well chosen: there is an actress called Kim Hunter, and moreover one who is not unknown to sf fans – she played "Zia" in the *Planet of the Apes* films [1968-1973]; it seems highly unlikely that this author is her, though.) *1st February 2001.*

Jakubowski, Maxim, ed. **The New English Library Book of Internet Stories**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-76974-2, xi+384pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf/crime/mainstream anthology, first edition; it contains all-new stories on e-mail and internet themes, by Steve Aylett, Nicholas Blincoe, Pat Cadigan, Stella Duffy, Christopher Fowler, Stewart Home, Toby Litt, Paul J. McAuley, Val McDermid, Chris Manby, China Miéville, Kim Newman, Ian Watson, John Williams and several others; oddly, the publishers extol themselves, rather than the book, on the back cover: "New English Library is possibly a unique brand name in publishing. A legendary imprint, from its inception in the 1970s it has come to define popular literature in Britain"; after scratching our head over this extraordinary statement [which, in any case, is factually wrong – New English Library was founded in the early 1960s, when a transatlantic company, New American Library, took over the old Four Square Books and renamed it in the same fashion as themselves], we tentatively conclude that what they're driving at is that in the early-to-mid 1970s they used to publish those "Skinhead" paperback originals by "Richard Allen" [James Moffatt] which in the past decade or so have become newly culty – latter-day "Britpulp" writers like Stewart Home, represented in this anthology, have mythicized the hell's-angel and skinhead hack novels that NEL published in the '70s, and the publishers are presumably hoping that a little of that retrospective glamour will brush off here; isn't it comical how things turn around with the passage of time? – if you'd asked the boss of NEL in 1970 what he was most pleased to be publishing he would probably have pointed to the novels of A. J. Cronin or Dorothy L. Sayers, or, just possibly, to Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* or Herbert's *Dune*.) *Late entry: November 2000 publication received in January 2001.*

King, Stephen. **Dreamcatcher**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-77071-6, 599pp, hard-

cover, £17.99. (Horror/mainstream novel, first published in the USA, 2001; proof copy received; it's being billed as King's "first full-length novel in three years" – which may be a slight exaggeration, but it's true that the last couple of books, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* [1999] and *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* [2000], were slim affairs, and one of them was non-fiction.) *29th March 2001.*

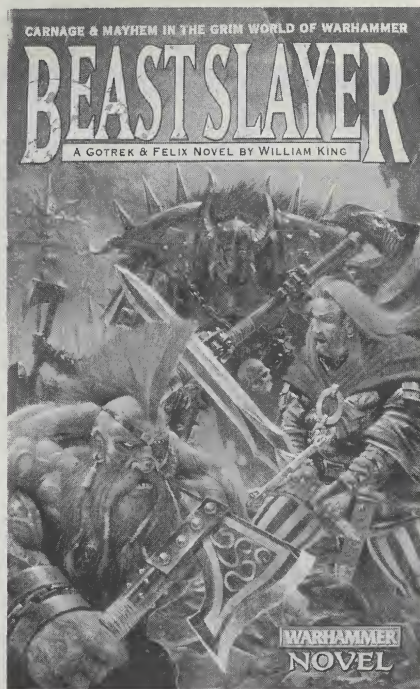
King, William. **Beastslayer**. "A Warhammer Novel. A Gotrek and Felix Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-137-0, 273pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; although it is the first we have been sent, this is the fifth in a "Warhammer" sub-series by Prague-resident Scotsman and erstwhile *Interzone*-contributor William King [born 1959], featuring his recurring characters Felix Jaeger and Gotrek Gurnisson – a sanguinary pair who first appeared in short stories over a decade ago; the earlier novel titles were *Trollslayer*, *Skavenslayer*, *Daemonslayer* and *Dragonslayer* – all presumably first published by Games Workshop in 1999-2000.) *January (?) 2001.*

Lentz, Harris M., III. **Science Fiction, Horror & Fantasy Film and Television Credits. Second Edition**. 3 volumes. McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0950-9, xxi+2227pp [pagination continuous throughout the three vols.], hardcover, \$195 the set. (Alphabetical who's who and filmography of sf, fantasy and horror films and TV shows; first edition in this form; sterling-priced import copies should be available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; this, surely the most massive thing we have ever been sent for review, reprises and updates [to the end of 1999] four earlier books by the same compiler first published in 1983 [two volumes], 1989 and 1994; the three volumes are subtitled as follows: 1: *Credits* [subdivided into "Actor and Actress Credits" and "Director, Producer, Screenwriter, Cinematographer, Special Effects Technician, Make-Up Artist, Art Director, and Other Credits"]; 2: *Filmography* and 3: *Television Shows*; apparently exhaustive, with over 2,000 treble-columned small-print pages, it serves to show how enormous the body of cinematic and TV sf and fantasy now is; recommended for reference collections with a sizeable budget.) *February 2001.*

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope: Avengers**. "E-Branch Volume 3." Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-79247-7, 438pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Stanczykowski, £17.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 2001; the follow-up to *Necroscope: Invaders* [1999] and *Necroscope: Defilers* [2000] in this ever-extending pulp-style adventure-horror series by a British writer whose books "have sold well in excess of two million copies.") *1st February 2001.*

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope: Defilers**. "E-Branch Continues..." New English Library, ISBN 0-340-79246-9, 659pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £17.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 2000.) *15th February 2001.*

McCaffrey, Anne. **The Dinosaur Planet Omnibus**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-030-X, 189+283pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark McKenna, £7.99. (Sf omnibus, first published in this form in the USA as *The Ireta Adventure*, 1985; the two novels it contains, *Dinosaur Planet* and *Dinosaur Planet II: Survivors*, were originally published individually in the UK in 1978 and 1984.) *1st February 2001.*



McCaffrey, Anne. **The Skies of Pern.** "Her magnificent new novel of the Dragons of Pern." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04330-8, 447pp, hardcover, cover by Les Edwards £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; the latest in McCaffrey's most popular series – which began over 30 years ago, with *Dragonflight* [1968].) 8th February 2001.

McDevitt, Jack. **Deepsix.** HarperCollins/Eos, ISBN 0-06-105124-1, 432pp, hardcover, \$25. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new hard-sf, outer-space-set, "brooding novel of suspense" from the increasingly-popular Mr McDevitt.) March 2001.

Marillier, Juliet. **Daughter of the Forest: Book One of the Sevenwaters Trilogy.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648398-4, 538pp, A-format paperback, cover by Neal Armstrong, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1999; a debut novel by a New Zealand-born writer who lives in Australia.) 5th February 2001.

Marillier, Juliet. **Son of the Shadows: Book Two of the Sevenwaters Trilogy.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224737-2, xi+548pp, C-format paperback, cover by Neal Armstrong, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA as *The Shrinking Man*, 1956; first published in this omnibus form, 1994; this attractive reissue of one of Matheson's best-known novels also contains nine short stories, including the well-known "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" [1962] and "Duel" [1971] – both of which, like the title novel, have inspired films, or parts of films.) 6th February 2001.

Matheson, Richard. **The Incredible Shrinking Man.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85664-4, 351pp, trade paperback, cover by Donato, \$14.95. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA as *The Shrinking Man*, 1956; first published in this omnibus form, 1994; this attractive reissue of one of Matheson's best-known novels also contains nine short stories, including the well-known "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" [1962] and "Duel" [1971] – both of which, like the title novel, have inspired films, or parts of films.) 6th February 2001.

Nagata, Linda. **Limit of Vision.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87688-2, 349pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's fifth novel, and her first for Tor Books, it's described as "a brilliant new biotechnology thriller.") March 2001.

Parrinder, Patrick, ed. **Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-584-8, viii+312pp, C-format paperback, cover by Helmut K. Wimmer, £16.95. (Anthology of critical essays by various hands, in response to Darko Suvin's theory of sf; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £35 [not seen]; contributors include Marc Angenot, Marleen S. Barr, Peter Fitting, Carl Freedman, Edward James, Frederic Jameson, David Ketterer, Gérard Klein, Tom Moylan, and Patrick Parrinder himself; there is also a lengthy afterword by Darko Suvin and a detailed bibliography of all Suvin's writings on sf; this heavyweight *festschrift* in honour of sf's most important academic critic is highly welcome – the most substantial book of "theoretical" sf criticism in some years; specific topics touched on include the sf of Stanislaw Lem, Kim Stanley Robinson, H. G. Wells and John Wyndham.) Late entry: 20th December 2000 publication, received in January 2001.

Ramsay, Robin. **The Pocket Essential Conspiracy Theories.** "Pocket Essentials Culture." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-30-7, 96pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Guide to crazy theories and paranoid ideas, many of them sf-tinged; first edition; it covers, with great

brevity, such topics as Global Manipulators, The Illuminati, The Masons, John F. Kennedy, Di and Dodi, the Moon-Landings and Extra-Terrestrials; despite the book's small size, there are pages and pages of notes; it looks like fun for some.) Late entry: December [?] 2000 publication, received in January 2001.

Richards, Justin. **Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Doomsday Manuscript.** "Bernice Summerfield, 1." Big Finish [PO Box 1127, Maidenhead SL6 3LW], ISBN 1-903654-04-1, 215pp, A-format paperback, cover by Carolyn Edwards, £6.99. (Shared-world sf novel, first edition; this is the first of a new paperback-original series picking up from where Virgin Publishing's "New Adventures" left off; the character of Bernice "Benny" Summerfield, an erstwhile companion of Doctor Who's in the Virgin novels, was created by Paul Cornell.) Late entry: November 2000 publication, received in January 2001.

Russo, Richard Paul. **Ship of Fools.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00798-8, 370pp, trade paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first edition; although the title has been used many times before, this is an interesting-looking generation-starship novel in sub-Gene Wolfe vein; Russo, an American writer who has been praised by Michael Bishop, Ursula Le Guin and others, remains little-known in Britain; this seems to be his first new novel since *Carlucci's Heart* [1997], but we listed his collection, *Terminal Visions* [Golden Gryphon Press, 2000], here a few months ago.) January 2001.

Silverberg, Robert. **The King of Dreams.** "A magnificent new epic in the Majipoor Cycle." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224745-3, 514pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £11.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2000; the seventh "Majipoor" book.) 19th February 2001.

Stableford, Brian. **The Cassandra Complex.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87773-0, 319pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the latest in Stableford's series of variations on a biotech theme for Tor Books [following *Inherit the Earth* (1998), *Architects of Emortality* (1999) and *The Fountains of Youth* (2000)], it's a considerable expansion of the story "The Magic Bullet," which first appeared in *Interzone* 29,

May/June 1989, and which topped our readers' story-poll for that year.) March 2001.

Straub, Peter. **Mr X.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651375-1, 626pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1999; winner of the Bram Stoker Award for the year's best horror; Stephen King blurbs it as Straub's "triumphant return to the tale of the paranormal and the supernatural"; it appears to have Lovecraftian content, and may well be this author's stab at a "Cthulhu Mythos" novel.) 5th February 2001.

Tenn, William. **Of Men & Monsters.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07234-2, 251pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1968; an effective satire on human beings accommodating themselves to an alien overlordship; it's prefaced by that devastating passage from *Gulliver's Travels* in which Jonathan Swift has the King of Brobdingnag describe humankind as "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.") 3rd December 2000.

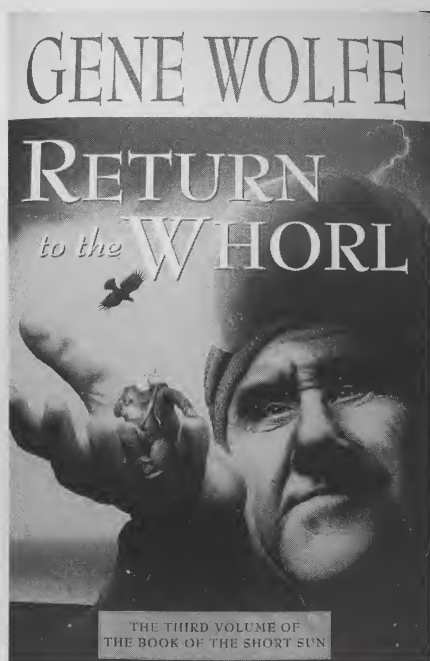
Tepper, Sheri S. **Beauty.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 14." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-722-5, 476pp, B-format paperback, cover by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; winner of the Locus Award for best fantasy of its year; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 65.) 8th February 2001.

Turtledove, Harry. **Through the Darkness.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87825-7, 478pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *Into the Darkness* [1999] and *Darkness Descending* [2000].) March 2001.

Wilson, Neil. **Shadows in the Attic: A Guide to British Supernatural Fiction, 1820-1950.** Introduction by Ramsey Campbell. The British Library, ISBN 0-7123-1074-6, xvii+554pp, hardcover, cover by John Atkinson Grimshaw, circa £45. (Alphabetical guide to the works of British supernatural authors, first edition; this hefty critical tome gives approximately half a page of notes on each author – some 200 are covered, from Harrison Ainsworth to P. C. Wren – followed by an annotated bibliography of his or her works in the genre; many of the writers are obscure – and that makes this a valuable reference resource.) Late entry: 30th November 2000 publication, received in January 2001.

Wolfe, Gene. **Return to the Whorl: Volume Three of The Book of the Short Sun.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87314-X, 412pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; final part of a major trilogy which is itself a follow-up to Wolfe's tetralogy "The Book of the Long Sun" [1993-1996]; the first part, *On Blue's Waters*, was published in October 1999 and reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 151; the second part, *In Green's Jungles*, was published in August 2000 and reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 161; unfortunately, unlike the first two volumes, we didn't receive an advance proof copy of this one, so the review will be delayed.) 19th February 2001.

Wolfe, Gene. **Strange Travelers.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87278-X, 383pp, trade paperback, cover by Giorgio De Chirico, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 2000; the first new collection by Wolfe in quite some time, it contains 15 stories, reprinted from Asimov's, F&SF, *Tomorrow* and numerous original anthologies of the 1990s; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 154.) January 2001.



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